The SOLDIER General's Self Saving Shizun
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/51101509.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Category:
Gen

Fandoms:
Compilation of Final Fantasy VII, 人渣反派自救系统 - 墨香铜臭 | The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù

Characters:
Sephiroth (Compilation of FFVII), Shen Yuan | Shen Qingqiu, Genesis Rhapsodos, Angeal Hewley, Lazard Deusericus, Tseng (Compilation of FFVII), Reno (Compilation of FFVII), Rude (Compilation of FFVII)

Additional Tags:
Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Crossovers & Fandom Fusions, Canon-Typical Violence, Transmigration, Headcanon, Don't copy to another site

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2023-10-25 Updated: 2023-11-27 Words: 73,208
Chapters: 22/?

The SOLDIER General's Self Saving Shizun

by esama

Summary

In which instead of waking up in the Sun and Moon Dew Flower body Shen Qingqiu transmigrates to another world.

Notes

Proofread by nimadge, many thanks.

See the end of the work for more notes

1-3

Shen Qingqiu hadn't exactly been expecting anything. Dirt, maybe, a forest perhaps - a clearing with a beautiful spring and impeccable Feng Shui preferably, but with Airplane-bro doing the arrangements he hadn't really put much hope into that. Either way, coming out of a plant, he figured there'd at least be soil.

Metal ceiling with bevelled corners and *fluorescent lights* was definitely not something he'd been thinking about. Hell, he didn't think he'd ever see fluorescent lights again! His new xianxia world didn't even have the concept of electricity, never mind making use of it beyond some lightning-based attacks, and even if he, as an immortal master, lived long enough to see technological progress, why would electrical lights become a thing when night pearls already exist? Never mind glowing talismans and various crystals and gemstones, and honestly, glowing moonlight snail worms in a lantern - and besides, the rules of xianxia basically forbid modern technology, because would it even be xianxia anymore at that point?

And that's completely beyond the point here.

Shen Qingqiu sits up, still staring at the fluorescent light in the ceiling. It's got a slight greenish hue and emits constant low hum of electricity. It looks painfully, incredibly mundane and utterly *real.*

Maybe it's a dream? He's dreaming of his past life. That has to be it.

Shen Qingqiu looks down and knows none of what he sees. Well, he *recognises* it - curtains on a frame at each side of his bed, uncomfortable looking chair sitting beside it, a metal bedside table, laptop with sorta janky angular design… Everything looks like it's made of metal, from the walls to the doors to the desk.

It's definitely no room Shen Yuan had ever lived in. It kind of looks like a hospital bed, but in no hospital he's ever been in.

Pushing the flimsy blanket off himself, Shen Qingqiu moves to stand up, only to stop and stare at his bare knees. He's only wearing modern underwear, and the fact that his legs are hairless isn't a surprise - Shen Qingqiu's body is perfectly smooth all over, of course, because xianxia - he's used to that. It's their shape that's new.

His knees look *muscled.* They begin from - *thicc* - equally muscled

thighs and continue onto shapely calves, and - and who has *muscled knees?* Honestly, they look like something that belongs to Liu Qingge, not him! Liu Qingge would have muscled knees!

Shen Qingqiu wasn't *weak,* alright, he trained, he practised with his sword, he could handle himself. He was a master of martial arts too, okay! But, uh, he didn't… exactly… look the part. Nor did he want to! That kind of shape took a lot of work to maintain, and with the Without a Cure poison -

Ah!

Shen Qingqiu quickly puts a hand on his - tight, *so tight*, flat, faintly ripped, definitely *muscled,* and now that he's looking, is that a *noticeable bulge* in his very tactical looking boxers, *holy shit,* okay, not the time - belly and circulates his Qi.

Correction, he *tries* to circulate his Qi.

It feels like he's trying to stir a pool of fresh cement with a spoon. There's energy there - a great thick *mass* of energy - but it doesn't flow. It barely even reacts to his crude poking.

This body hasn't ever cultivated - and yet it is practically bursting with power.

Oh, is that how the Sun and Moon Dew Flower body works? That makes sense. Of course, it's new, so it would've never cultivated, it wouldn't have a shaped core. Honestly, he should be grateful that it has any energy at all! He might've come out of his resurrection without any power entirely! Having this much energy to mould into a new core is a blessing. And his veins…

His spiritual veins feel a little *burnt* somehow, but that's not too bad! Probably just a side effect from all this energy roaming freely in his body. Shen Qingqiu's body has damaged spiritual veins too, he's used to working around it. And either way, the Without a Cure is gone! That's already a huge leap forward for him, even if he had to start from scratch.

Running a hand up and down his - *washboard abs, holy shit* - stomach, and feeling long hair - so familiar he almost didn't notice - falling down his back, Shen Qingqiu looks up and then frowns.

New body doesn't explain the room he's in. It doesn't explain the electrical lights. It doesn't explain -

A hand rips aside the left side curtain with a screech of metal rings on a metal frame, and a doctor steps into view.

It's unmistakably a doctor, with a white lab coat and clipboard, eyeglasses and irritated expression and everything.

"So, you're up," the man says, looking at him down his nose and sniffing. He takes out a pen and turns his attention to the clipboard. "Well then. How do you feel?"

Shen Qingqiu reframes his world with the swiftness of a practised transmigrator and a liar and hangs his head as though it hurts. Hair falls to curtain his face, hopefully hiding his expression. It's surprisingly pale. Hm. "What happened?"

Oh, nice, his voice is almost the same. A little lower, maybe, but familiar enough.

The doctor glances at him. "Confusion," he says and marks it down. "Not a common symptom for you. What else?"

Shen Qingqiu hesitates, unsure, and looks down at himself. He's got muscles on muscles, and his internal energies feel like a concrete truck ready for a pour, but aside from that there's no clues as to what he's supposed to say.

System? He thinks warily.

He gets the mental equivalent of a busy signal. Which is a… pretty weird sensation, really.

"What else?" the doctor demands impatiently.

Shen Qingqiu, uncertain, asks again, "What happened?"

The doctor narrows his eyes at him and then scoffs. "The assistant misjudged the dosage. I should've never let him handle your injection, but what's done is done. You received three times your maximum, and your body shut down briefly to accommodate."

… What? What is any of that even supposed to mean? Aside from that last point… that sounded far too familiar. "My heart stopped?" Shen Qingqiu asks slowly, pushing his long bangs back from his face.

"Only for a moment - we didn't even need to resuscitate you, your body recovered on its own - a notable new mutation, which has been

added to your file, but unlikely to be very useful going forward," the doctor says, looking at the clipboard again. "It's likely only applicable to specific circumstances, and you shouldn't rely on it in the field. Blood loss will kill you eventually, even if your heart can restart itself, so don't count on it even as a last resort."

… Yeah, Shen Qingqiu has no idea what to make of that. "I wasn't planning on it," he says and clears his throat. This place and this guy is starting to give him the creeps now. "I feel fine now. Can I go?"

The doctor tsks at him, marks something down and tucks the clipboard under his arm. "Fine. Your next dose is in two weeks, on the 17th. *Don't* miss it."

Shen Qingqiu hums, noncommittal, and misses his fan. If these *doses* killed the new original goods, he's not sure he'd be taking any more, not if he had any choice.

The doctor scoffs, reminding Shen Qingqiu for a moment of himself in a weird way - what the original Shen Qingqiu might've looked like for original Luo Binghe - and turns to leave. "Get out of here then, Sephiroth. Your clothes are in the closet in the back."

"... Thanks," Shen Qingqiu murmurs and then lifts his head, feeling his face go slack in shock. There's a strand of pale - *silver!* - hair in front of his face, and thankfully the doctor is already out of view and can see his reaction, because, what…?

… *What* did the man just call him?

In a restroom near the infirmary, Shen Qingqiu takes a long look at himself, at his life, at his situation.

Though he's not *Shen Qingqiu* anymore, is he? He's someone else now. Someone super tall, super buff, super *dangerous,* from what he remembers - someone, who, like all the great superstars, only has one name.

Sephiroth.

It scarcely makes sense. Actually, it doesn't make *any* sense! And neither does his mirror reflection! Nor the utterly ridiculous coat he's supposed to be wearing! Even Binghe didn't have his chest *this badly*

exposed! There's so much leather! Leather trousers and boots and coat and no shirt, at all, just his chest all out for the whole world to see!

Shen Qingqiu's adopted xianxia sensibilities are swooning in shock at the indecency. Indecency, he says! He's used to wearing the *minimum* of six layers, none of them *skin tight,* and in the meanwhile Sephiroth barely fits into three! Technically two and a half!

Sephiroth is - he looks like -

He actually looks a lot like Shen Qingqiu? Mostly around the face. Same kinda narrow features, sharp eyes, straight nose… the colouring and the, ahem, proportions are a bit off - Sephiroth is *huge,* maybe even taller than Binghe! Muscles on muscles, seriously! But, give him a hair dye and some robes, and, well. He might pass for Shen Qingqiu's taller, buffer brother!

Which is kinda, ahem. Shen Yuan sort of also had that resemblance, just in the other direction. Smaller and softer. It probably means something, but he's too busy trying to get his stupid indecent leather coat to close at the front to care.

The coat does not close. It's literally too small. Who would've thought, the big bad badass boss of Final Fantasy VII had his tits out, because his clothes were just too small! What, did he outgrow them?

Get a new coat!

Giving up on the clothes, Shen Qingqiu - or should he think of himself as Sephiroth now? - runs his only slightly shaking hands over and down his hair. At least that's sort of familiar. Sephiroth's hair is a bit longer than Shen Qingqiu's, but at least he's used to handling long hair like it. The colour is new, and he can tell it hasn't been oiled like his used to be in PIDW, but instead it has that nostalgic quality of being *conditioned.* And that's, honestly, something to look forward to! Shampoo and conditioner and, oh, gods, *showers!* Not only that, but there's electricity, and there are electrical appliances - so, following that logic, Sephiroth might even have a *hair dryer!*

If only it didn't come with the burden of becoming yet another doomed-to-die villain. At least it's not a scum villain this time - no, just the crazy one with mommy issues who tries to destroy the planet! Fun!

Curiously gathering his hair into a loose version of Shen Qingqiu's usual updo, he turns his face this way and that. Damn, but Sephiroth

is *pretty*. Glowing green eyes and hair like spun silver, and body of Adonis. Yet another beautiful man with a terrible past and worse future.

Maybe Shen Yuan's soul is cursed in some way.

Dropping the hair and letting it cascade back down over the pauldrons capping his already ridiculously broad shoulders, he leans over the restroom sink and tries to remember what even happened in FFVII.

It's been well over two decades since he played it! It or Crisis Core - or whatever it was, the PSP sequel-prequel thing with Zack? Sephiroth had made a bunch of cameos in other games too, and then there was the movie - so who knows which version he's in! Which timeline, which moment in which timeline? Maybe he's in Kingdom Hearts! He could be! For all he knows, he might be in some official novel version, and he'd never read any of those, if they even exist!

Safe to say it's *before* the main game, though, what with him being *alive* and, judging by things… in Shinra. Figure they probably wouldn't be doing medical stuff for him if he'd already stabbed the president to death. And that happened years after he died, so, uh… it's probably somewhere in the Crisis Core era. Or any number of the mobile games that took place in between, though he'd never really looked into those. So. Uh…

After having his life revolve around PIDW and cultivation and *Luo Binghe,* it's *weird,* trying to remember an ancient PS1 game. Though he'd played it emulated on the computer. Thankfully, he's not in that version, graphics-wise, that would've been painful. And speaking of pain…

If nothing else, he's well out of Luo Binghe's reach now, far better than he would've been in just the Sun and Moon Dew Flower body. He paid back his debts best he could when he self-destructed, and now he's off to a whole different world, genre, even the media is different! No being torn limb from limb here! Just a lot of stab wounds. And, well, maybe some medical torture. And, uh, several short-term resurrections followed by more stabbing to death… while slowly losing his mind… and growing extra limbs… uh.

Still, definitely an upgrade from years upon years as a tortured human stick before being killed by his favourite character! And he doesn't even have a System here! No OOC lock! No B-points or System punishments!

He lights incense in his heart for Airplane-bro, all the while nodding to himself in congratulations for this positive turn of events. Airplane would've felt similarly in his boots, surely. His ridiculous, knee-high, edgelord boots.

Feeling a little better, he rummages through Sephiroth's pockets and comes away with a treasure trove of props. Keys, key cards, *glowing marbles of Magic,* which he knows are Materia, but which to his lingering Shen Qingqiu sensibilities look like first grade spirit stones… and best of all…

He brings it out slowly and holds it up reverently. It's the most special, most magical thing he's seen in years! It's so beautiful, he could weep!

Sephiroth, it so happens, has a *smartphone.*

There's a restroom on the lowest of the Science floors that's kinda sacred for the SOLDIERs. Well, it's probably sorta sacred for everyone who has to go through the floors for any reason other than because they actually like their job - which is probably everyone other than professor Hojo himself. But it's especially so for the SOLDIERs.

It's the closest restroom to the laboratories. Mainly, the *injection* laboratory. And so it tends to be the first stop for any SOLDIER immediately post-injection. And as SOLDIER members get injected monthly, they become very familiar with it.

It's not special in any way - actually, it's pretty much identical to about a hundred other restrooms in the Shinra building. There's two urinals, two sinks, three toilet stalls and two fluorescent lights, one of them always broken - the one over the stalls, namely. Whenever it's fixed, it would promptly break again, coincidentally the same time the next SOLDIER came around.

By common, unspoken agreement, lab technicians never use the bathroom and the custodial staff avoid it, so usually the light stays unfixed for months - until someone new comes around, someone who doesn't know the standard MO. They learn quickly. Nothing brings the point home quite like seeing an enhanced super SOLDIER lose their shit - sometimes literally.

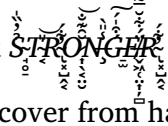
This particular restroom, or rather The Restroom, has probably seen the worst the SOLDIER program has to offer. Sweat, tears, vomit,

panic attacks, blood too - freakouts by the dozen. The SOLDIERs have probably spent more time cleaning the place up than the custodial staff, at this point. It's become something of a sanctuary, with offerings to match - from the not so hidden painkillers, stress toys and the shock blanket in the first stall, to the porn mags and… other things in the second, to the third stall.

Third stall is people's favourite. The inside is completely covered in writing. Jokes, complaints, dozens of phone numbers boasting different forms of comfort, thousands of curse words, witty one-liners - encouragements. The entirety of LOVELESS is inscribed on the left side wall, with a small line beneath it, saying: *goddamnit Genesis.*

There's one line in the middle of the door, just at eye level, that's been overwritten and underlined by ten different markers for emphasis.

Whatever doesn't kill you makes you STRONGER



It's not exactly the best place to recover from having liquid fire injected into your veins, but it is the closest, and if you need to have a private freakout and get it out of the way as quickly as possible, proximity matters.

And that's where SOLDIER Third Class, Luxiere, stumbles post-op with his veins *writhing* inside him and his brain feeling like it's going to burst out of his skull. He's thinking, *first stall.* He needs something in his hand to squeeze before it starts cramping. He wants the blanket. He wants to sit somewhere private for just five, ten minutes, before he can trust himself not to wreck the elevator and everything else between him and the hot shower.

He does *not* want to see SOLDIER First Class Sephiroth hanging around in The Restroom, casually leaning his hip on a sink while he scrolls through his PHS.

The First Class looks up, eyes narrowing, tilting the PHS toward his chest like he's hiding whatever is on the screen.

Luxiere stops, swallows, says, "Sir," and hopes he doesn't throw up on the man's shoes. Or do something stupid, like ask for an autograph or training.

"... At ease," Sephiroth says after a moment, leaving Luxiere teetering at the edge of the door.

If it was *literally any other SOLDIER,* Luxiere would've thrown a weary

salute and stumbled to the stall. Even if it was Genesis or Angeal, he could've done it. He would've been embarrassed, but he wouldn't have minded, he would've known they understood. For fuck's sake, half of the affirmations in the third stall are written in Angeal's hand.

He didn't know Sephiroth ever used The Restroom, though. He didn't think Sephiroth came through Injections. Didn't he get his straight from Hojo? That's what everyone says, no one ever sees him in regular injection wards. Hell, half of the SOLDIERs are convinced Sephiroth probably doesn't even have normal bodily functions, never mind needing *The Restroom.* What is he *doing* here?

Sephiroth doesn't even look real. Maybe Luxiere is seeing things? Mako injections can make you hallucinate, right?

… Probably best he didn't put it to a test, just in case. He already isn't sure he can ever look at the man the same way again.

He's still staring. They're both staring. It's awkward.

Finally, slowly, Sephiroth moves to lean against the back wall, and turns his attention back to the PHS, his eyes hard and keen. Whatever he's reading looks important.

Cautiously, Luxiere steps in and the Restroom door closes behind him, leaving him alone with the First Class. He feels like he shouldn't make any noises, but, at the same time…

There're many unspoken rules about The Restroom, and the first one is, you use the stalls for privacy. When there's someone in the stalls, you don't acknowledge them. You let them have their fit in private.

Hanging out by the sinks… that has the opposite significance. A silent request for companionship. And finding *Sephiroth* by the sinks is so bizarre that Luxiere almost can ignore the burning inside him. Like, fuck. What is he supposed to do here? He should say something. It's Sephiroth, he should…?

"... Injections, sir?" he asks awkwardly.

Sephiroth glances up. "... Mn," he answers. Awkwardly.

"That's… rough," Luxiere offers, mentally going, *what do I do, what do I say, what are you supposed to say in situations like this?* He should definitely do something. "Sir, are you, uh -?"

"I'm fine," Sephiroth says curtly, like he's *not hanging out in The Restroom.* He turns his eyes back onto the PHS. "Carry on."

Ah, o-okay then? Luxiere clears his throat and then moves to the first stall, closing the door robotically and grabbing a SOLDIER grade stress ball in each hand. His forearms burn, and there's a panic attack building in his guts, which has nothing to do with the injection.

He can hear the slightest creak of leather, as the other occupant of the Restroom moves. There's the sound of PHS keys being pressed. A slight breath. Weight being shifted. Like the First Class is *relaxing,* settling in for the long haul.

Fuck.

Sephiroth is hanging around in The Restroom.

Sephiroth is hanging around in The Restroom.

The moment his arms stop convulsing, Luxiere shakily digs out his PHS and sends an SOS to Lazard, with those exact words.

4-6

Sephiroth's phone isn't a proper smartphone and has no internet, and he's being *very* brave about it.

Well, it has *something*. It *is*… kinda like a half-assed smartphone? Sorta. It's like that old flip phone his grandfather used to use - probably still does, if he's still alive, somewhere in another universe. It was more brick than a phone - no touchscreen, and the closest it got to any kind of smart features was running an email app, somehow. Sephiroth's phone is a bit like it. It has email - or just mail, apparently. It also has tutorials? Which is useful. Also online shopping? But no apps, no search function, no internet, no wikis, no websites, nothing. It doesn't seem to have photo or video options either - but apparently it keeps track of all his missions.

It's like somehow people invented most of everything that goes into a smartphone - but no one got around to inventing the *internet* , or anything like it. What a waste!

The tutorials are useful, admittedly, though they're more like manuals, really. Not like cultivation manuals, sadly, more like user manuals. "How to use your PHS" and "what key card opens what floor" and "missions, what are missions" and "Materia, what is it and how does it work". There's dozens and dozens of tutorials on the phone, just like you might expect to find in a videogame that couldn't trust its users to remember how everything works.

The mission roster is, uh. It's definitely something. There's categories, subcategories, levels, and then under those there's info and completion status. And Sephiroth, apparently, does a lot of missions. Like. *A lot.* He kinda despairs at the idea of having to keep up with it, because it looks like Sephiroth is a workaholic. Though, thankfully, half of the missions are training, experiments in the labs, or experimental training. Still! Isn't he supposed to be the Big Bad? Why is he working so hard?!

The shops' menu on the phone, though very bare bones and lacking any pictures, has his heart leaping with joy - as does the adjacent menu detailing Sephiroth's wallet situation. Which is… *very good.* Like, Shen Qingqiu wasn't exactly short on change either, he was the second Peak Lord of the most powerful sect in the world - but comparing the Gil Sephiroth has to the price of stuff in the various shops listed on his phone…

Sephiroth has that *fuck you* money. Guess that's what you get from being a workaholic Big Bad, the strongest and scariest in the evil dystopian planet-sucking mega corporation! You get *money.* And *lots* of it.

… Which, along with the details of all the clothing stores on his phone, makes his wardrobe situation even sadder, doesn't it? He should've definitely been able to afford a coat that actually fit him.

Ultimately though, what he figures to be most useful is the mail. There's a lot of it, and it looks like mailing lists are all the rage these days. Because Sephiroth's barely got anything else in his inbox.

News mailing list, SOLDIER mailing list, Shinra mailing list - professor Hojo telling him to go to the labs - another news mailing list, Shinra business mailing list, Wutai News mailing list - Genesis telling him to meet him for a spar - another mailing list, mailing list, mailing list - urgent meeting with Director Lazard - and some more mailing lists.

There are not that many personal messages, honestly. A few requests for a spar, and that's about it. Is that all he does for fun? What is Sephiroth, Liu Qingge 2.0? All he does is work and spar! Just skimming through his schedule makes him feel *exhausted.*

At least thanks to the mailing lists - and phone's bare bones calendar app - he'd figured where he's at, story-wise. Pre-Crisis Core, pre-Genesis' whole thing, pre… just about everything he remembers from each game.

Wutai war is still going on. And, rather distressingly, Sephiroth has a *lot* of Wutai missions coming up.

That's… not ideal.

Resting the phone against his lips in thought like he once held a fan, he sighs and tries to think it through.

There's a squeak as the other SOLDIER steps out of the stall. Must've been the door hinges. "Sir," the SOLDIER says, carefully.

"Mn," he answers and tries to look as Sephiroth-like as he can while also projecting an aura of *don't talk to me, I don't even know your name* at the man. It works, because the man clearly doesn't want to talk to him.

It's very useful, having a villain halo.

The SOLDIER washes his hands like he can't wait to get away and then hesitates at the door. "Sir, I - there's someone -" the SOLDIER says, tentatively and then flounders at his slow blink. "Someone will be here soon."

With that said, the SOLDIER flees before he can think of a suitably Sephiroth-like answer.

Someone will be here soon? …Okay? *Why?*

Making a face, he looks around in confusion and notices that one of the bathroom lights is burned out.

Oh, someone will be here for the light? Right, of course, he's the scary Big Bad here, can't subject the scary Big Bad to a less than stellar environment. Heh, guess that's an upgrade of sorts!

He… really didn't want it.

It's all rather concerning, really. What is he actually supposed to do here? Go on missions, train, clad himself in barely fitting leather with a ridiculous amount of buckles, and *go to war?* Over building a life-sucking factory? By a vaguely western, very unsubtle Big Oil Allegory, at that. In what was a vaguely Chinese-coded land, too. The whole thing was very iffy, from what he remembers! He doesn't want to get involved!

And then what is he supposed to do, play out Sephiroth's life to its fiery, insane conclusion? Resurrect and then attempt to destroy the world?! Like all the good Big Bads of old! But he isn't even sure when that is supposed to happen! The timeline in these games is super vague!

At least with PIDW there was a very clear end goal, ah! It was awful and trying to survive had given him grey hairs, but there was a clear forward momentum and an end point! If he survived past it, then… then he won? Maybe?

He hadn't survived past it, though.

He'd died.

… Again.

Closing his eyes, he sighs against Sephiroth's phone, shaking his head. Depressing, depressing, it's so *depressing!* He'd really grown to like his

life as Shen Qingqiu too! All his cute disciples, his books on Qing Jing Peak, his art works, all the things he'd got… all the things he'd done… the friends he'd made…

And Binghe…

Ah, his sweet, terrifying Black Lotus. As scary as Binghe had been towards the end, he's really sad he wouldn't be able to see Binghe grow into his own! Reading about the protagonist growing stronger and overcoming all obstacles had been his favourite part. And he'd rather been looking forward to watching it. Safely at a distance, mind you, disguised in another, unknown, body, under a new name and everything. Because if Binghe found out he survived…

Well.

Probably just as well. This is a new world and maybe, just maybe, he can now -

There's a sound that is an awful lot like an explosion, and he nearly drops his phone in shock as the restroom door is nearly blown off its hinges with the force it opens.

"What torment hath your soul suffered," espouses the runaway *idol* standing dramatically in the doorway, "to find the end of your journey *here,* of all places?"

In the immortal words of Airplane Shooting Towards The Sky.

W. T. F?

Sephiroth looks panicked.

Genesis looks him over with an experienced eye, swiftly and with increasing concern.

Defensive stance with his back to a wall and The Restroom's only exit clear in sight. His face is pale - well, it's *always* pale, but now he looks practically grey. Shadows under his eyes, wide eyes, mouth slack. Well, *for Sephiroth,* anyway. The man has a resting face of a statue carved by the thirstiest of hands, and sometimes Genesis wonders if he has a partial facial paralysis, so little does it change. But he can tell the difference between Sephiroth with a resting face and Sephiroth

with a spooked face.

"Sephiroth," Genesis greets him.

"... Genesis," Sephiroth says, and it doesn't sound even vaguely irritated. Mostly he sounds confused.

How concerning!

Side effects, then, bad ones. He'd managed to get out of Injections without being held back, so they're not physical. Mental.

No outward aggression, his pose is subtly defensive, shoulders ever so slightly curled in, holding his PHS in both hands. Was he messaging someone? Unlikely, with Sephiroth, he must've been reading something, trying to distract himself, redirect whatever is going on in his head. Or…

Or it's that… *other* side effect.

Genesis had been gearing up to annoy Sephiroth back into sanity, but with this new information he quickly changes tacks. Sephiroth isn't about to lose it - he already did. "I heard you were locked up in Injections for a full day. How bad was it?"

Sephiroth hesitates and his fingers tighten around the phone. Then he looks down. *Demurely?*

What?

"Three times the maximum dose," Sephiroth says.

Oh. "What, are they trying to *kill* you now?" Genesis asks incredulously. "See how far they can push the envelope before it *bursts into flames?* Questionable indeed is the wisdom of the professor, by the *Goddess."* Sephiroth's doses are already the highest in the program.

Sephiroth looks at him weirdly. "... Well, my heart did stop," he says finally. "Apparently."

Genesis makes a face. "Condolences," he says, wincing sympathetically. That was always the worst. "What's the damage?"

"I'm fine," Sephiroth says quickly.

"Ha! My friend, legend shall speak of this day," Genesis points out, motioning around them, at the restroom. "Of the greatest warrior -

holed up post-op in The Restroom. You scared the poor Third Class who was here, he sent out an SOS."

Sephiroth scrunches up his nose at that, mouthing that, *SOS.* "And so you're here to save my soul?" he asks bitchily.

Heh, already he's starting to feel better. And to think Lazard panicked about Angeal not being in Midgar to take care of it. Little does he know - Genesis is the *best* at this.

"I shall be your hero of dawn at this hour," he agrees and steps closer. No defensive reaction, so he dares to reach out. "It's alright, my friend - we've all been there."

Sephiroth looks uncomfortable with Genesis' hand on his arm but doesn't try to knock it off. "I…" he says and then glances down at Genesis' chest. He looks resentful.

Being such a big man, he does small and defensive poorly. It's like watching a dragon curl in a corner. Tragic and kind of terrifying.

"Feel like you got a hole in your head?" Genesis says knowingly. "All your thoughts rattled, memories all up in the air? Any idea about how much you lost?"

"I'm *fine* -"

"Last year I came out of the labs and I couldn't recite half of the dialogue from LOVELESS!" Genesis admits bluntly. "It was unbearable, I was beside myself for a week - I had to re-memorise the whole thing."

Sephiroth looks confused at that, giving him a wary look. "That's…" he trails away, uncertain.

"A common side effect. Happens to everyone, to some extent," Genesis assures him easily. Honestly, he thought it happened *most* to Sephiroth. He has the personality of a man chemically *lobotomised*… like a lot of the early SOLDIER candidates. "Mako gives and Mako takes. In the wake of these crashing waves, we do our best to fill in the broken flood barriers of our minds. So. What is the damage?"

Sephiroth hesitates. "It's… nothing I can't figure out on my own."

Obviously, and even if he couldn't, it wouldn't matter - Shinra didn't keep them on Mako for their brains or their wit. Sephiroth could lose

his mind and become a drooling idiot, and Shinra would still pump raw force into his veins, so long as he did their bidding. Which is honestly a shame - Sephiroth, when he could be annoyed into it, had a poetic sense of humour and came across as an intellectual.

"My friend, fates are cruel," Genesis says, shaking his head. "But we need not face their winds alone. What can't you remember?" He was obviously trying to look up *something* , after all.

Sephiroth looks away, his eyes troubled, and *hides behind the PHS.* "... My room," he admits finally. "I can't… figure out where my room is."

Genesis carefully doesn't laugh at that. It's *not* funny. It happens to a lot of fresh SOLDIERs, and it's never not hilarious, watching baby Thirds bumbling around like lost ducklings - but it's not funny now. Sephiroth must be seriously distressed. He doesn't know how to get home!

A snicker manages to slip through, and Sephiroth glares at him, hard. "Apologies, apologies, my friend," Genesis says and grins. "Happens to the best of us. Apparently! Did you not check your key card?"

Sephiroth scowls and digs around his pockets, bringing our four key cards. He looks at them with embarrassed frustration and Genesis picks out the one to his private room. "Here - the floor and room number is written right here."

"... Ah," Sephiroth says.

Oh! Genesis didn't know Sephiroth could *blush!*

Oh… oh, that is terrible, that's utterly horrible.

Genesis clears his throat. "Come, my friend, let me escort you to your dwelling," he says and motions grandly to the door. "Where we shall partake in that awful tea you favour and lament our pride lost!"

Sephiroth, still looking a little flushed, makes another bitch face at him and then allows himself to be herded out of the sanctuary of the Restroom.

Genesis *despairs.*

This man, this most devastating of individuals, tall and broad and proud and terribly handsome, isn't supposed to be cute!

Genesis enters Sephiroth's room like he owns the place, which is probably a good thing, because the man the room belongs to has no idea what's even in there.

As it turns out, not much.

It's not small, exactly, for a single room apartment with a kitchenette and a bathroom it's actually really spacious! It even has two nice big windows! But it's… spartan. There's a bed, a desk, and the tiniest of kitchen tables. The only thing that could maybe, imaginatively, be called decoration is the stand on which sits Sephiroth's ridiculously long sword. And… that's it.

"Ah, home sweet home," Genesis says, shaking his head and tutting at him. "You, my friend, are in desperate need of colour in your life."

Well - he doesn't disagree! Everything in the room is drab gunmetal grey, mass-produced and sad. Even the curtainless windows just look *depressing.* And the Feng Shui of the place is *awful.* Sephiroth's bed is near the door, and you need to go around it to the bathroom, and his desk is facing the corner! The flow of energy is all over the place!

And okay, maybe Feng Shui isn't a thing here - but still! There should be some plants, at least! Some artwork maybe! A carpet or two? The bed doesn't even have a duvet! And there's more than enough room for a couch here, maybe even two. Doesn't Sephiroth ever have people over?

Looking at Genesis, rummaging through the cupboards and making faces at the lack of actual cups there… probably not. Because it seriously looks like Sephiroth had precisely *one* of everything. One tea mug, one glass, one plate, one bowl and one of each utensils. And no pots and pans. Microwave and electric kettle, and that's it.

If it turns out that Sephiroth only just has instant noodles in his cupboard…

Genesis compromises by using the mug and the water glass to make tea, and the Peak Lord of Qing Jing Peak winces at the brusque thoughtless *scalding* of the poor tea in its teabags.

"Don't make faces at me - you're the one who doesn't have cups," Genesis says with a sniff and carries the cups to the kitchen table. It's

round, metallic, and the chairs look utterly uncomfortable. "Come on, tell me everything. Unburden your tale of woe."

Currently his biggest woe is the veritable black hole of Feng Shui that's Sephiroth's room and he'd like nothing more than to rearrange everything. Right after raiding the wardrobe to see if the man owns a single functional shirt.

Giving Genesis' turtleneck a bitter glance, he goes to sit down. Genesis is cursed with the Final Fantasy Buckles too, but he's got a shirt. Life is utterly unfair.

"Well?" Genesis asks, pushing the tea glass over the metal table. It rattles. "What happened at the lab?"

Making a face, he takes the glass. The tea smells strongly of *this will taste awful.* "I already told you. Three times the maximum dose."

"So you don't remember?" Genesis asks, perceptively.

Well, obviously not. Sephiroth died, and by the time he appeared, his body was already patched up. It's really very similar to how he landed in Shen Qingqiu. Mako injection instead of Qi deviation, but from what he remembers of FFVII… isn't Mako also energy? Life blood of the planet, condensed. Which was being injected into people.

He… really needs to figure out what that means in the framework of cultivation, if anything. It might be applicable - energy is energy. Or it might be just magic.

"The winds of fate have blown a mighty storm your way, then," Genesis says, taking a sip of tea. He doesn't look like he likes it.

Giving the man a slight shake of Sephiroth's head, he hums. "I feel fine," he says, feeling like a broken record. It'd really be better if the man just left, so that he could sort himself out. And then the room. And then the wardrobe. And then investigate if the laptop would be just as disappointing as the phone has been. "I just need… a break. To recover." Hint, hint!

Genesis stares at him blankly and puts the mug down with a sharp noise. "Well, now I know it's a disaster! Sephiroth himself, asking for a break? Stop the presses, the narrative has gone completely off the rails!"

Leaning back a little, he covers his frustration by taking a drink of

Sephiroth's tea and then covering his cough in a displeased hum. Ugh, it's just as bad as he thought it would be. "I can't take a break?" he asks resentfully.

"No, no, of course no one says you can't! Except maybe professor Hojo, but we shall ignore him for the time being," Genesis says quickly and leans forward. "But, Sephiroth, when have you *ever* taken a break?"

… Depressing! Why is the scary epic Big Bad so depressing?! That's not how it should be! Isn't he supposed to be off-the-rails, scenery-chewing, scene-stealing thing of badassery? One of the most iconic villains of video game history?! With the bombastic theme and the crazy eyes?! Hello?! Why is he *so sad?!*

Genesis watches him for a moment and then leans forward. "Give me your PHS."

"What?"

"Your PHS," Genesis says impatiently, making a *gimme* gesture at Sephiroth's pocket. "Give it to me."

".... Why?" he asks suspiciously, putting a protective hand over it. It's where Sephiroth's phone is.

"So that I can send Lazard your appeal for time off! Goddess knows you won't do it yourself - the moment I turn my back you'll probably be heading off to a training mission or something," Genesis says pointedly. "So *give."*

But… it's *his* phone now…

"I'll leave you to mope in peace if you do," Genesis bargains, rolling his eyes. "You'll have all the time in the world to lick your wounds and figure out how to cover it up so that no one will be the wiser, I promise. Once I get you some actual time off."

Genesis was - would be - the main villain in Crisis Core. Can he trust the man with Sephiroth's phone? The man looks keen and sincere, but he also looks like he's up to something. And also *onto him* , which is not great!

Ah, he's really messing this up, without a System to scream at him about what's OOC and what isn't, huh.

Genesis wiggles his fingers, insistent.

… Some time to himself would be great, though. And free time would mean that he wouldn't have to deal with missions just yet. That… could only be good. Maybe there's some honour between villains? It was a big theme in Crisis Core, honour.

"Don't do anything weird with it," he says finally and hands Sephiroth's flip phone over.

"Would *I* do such a thing?" Genesis asks, huffing in offence and snatches the phone right up. He doesn't even wait for a reply, already typing away quickly and with gleeful flourish.

Giving the man a suspicious look over his glass of horrible tea, the transmigrator can only hope he wouldn't regret this.

The message Genesis sends to the Director of SOLDIER is decently professional, if a bit presumptuous. It goes along the lines of, " *On account of my recent incident in the Science Department, I will be taking some time off for personal reasons,"* and it's barely even a request, more a demand. But it gets Sephiroth the time off he needs, and promptly, at that - whole *three days* of it, too! It's most appreciated.

The mailing lists Genesis joins, however, *aren't.*

7-9

First things first: a proper, decent and hopefully *fully chest-covering* shirt.

Sephiroth has them, and *none of them fit.* He has, literally, outgrown all his shirts, turtlenecks and jackets, and judging by the looks of it, he'd never bothered to get new ones. Even the stretchiest of them pops stitches when trying to accommodate his shoulders and chest! It's ridiculous! What, was he a little string bean of a man and then burst into a beefcake overnight?

Ignoring the influx of new messages from the mailing lists Genesis subscribed Sephiroth's phone to, he investigates the shops' menu with more detail. It soon proves he definitely has access to clothing stores and he definitely has the money to use them. He also has the means to just requisition a free new uniform from SOLDIER any time he wants, but apparently pressing a few buttons was too much work for the man! Better have your chest out and about than bother with the barest minimum of effort for the sake of personal comfort or public decency, apparently!

So, add *laziness* to the reasons why Sephiroth's outfit is like that.

…Or maybe, possibly, some form of executive dysfunction? It might explain the room he's supposed to be living in, which is barely fitting for *existing* in. After a more thorough look, it really looks like everything was just placed wherever, with no care to how it looked or what the vibes were. It has a very *that's good enough* feel to it.

Except it isn't! It's awful! The place is barely better than a first year college dorm room! Not that he'd know what those look like, he had his own apartment by then - but still! You can do better, surely!

No, wait, actually - how *old* is Sephiroth right now?

The bathroom mirror isn't very helpful. Sephiroth has that same androgynous ageless look that Shen Qingqiu has - just much beefier and sorta monochrome. In xianxia terms he could be anywhere from twenty to two thousand, hah! Though from what he recalls of the game, weren't everyone kinda young? Old for JRPG, what with only *one* teenager in the main character group! But still way under thirties. And this is way before that….

Ahhh, he misses fan wikis! He needs thoroughly documented timelines! He needs a birthday! He needs a character ID - he needs -!

Actually, Sephiroth should have some kind of ID, being an evil megacorp employee, right? An employee card, or what a SOLDIER might have. Dog tags?

Quickly he begins rummaging about his person again.

There are no dog tags, but Sephiroth does have a wallet and a bunch of cards. Including a Shinra Employee, Personnel Medical Information, Shinra Science Department and Shinra Military cards. And Sephiroth is twenty-one, apparently.

That's… hmm.

Yeah, he has no idea what to do with that - but it explains the awful dorm room vibe! Clearly the guy didn't have experience with how to live. And who knows how long Sephiroth has been living on his own, anyway, and where and how he lived before. Plus, with his schedule, he can't be spending much time at all in this room. None, apparently, if he could manage it. And no wonder! The place is soul-suckingly awful.

Well, that's not how *he's* going to live, that's for sure. The shirtless life is not for him!

Hmm… ordering clothes and stuff without even seeing what they look like first, though…

Snapping the flip phone shut, he goes to investigate the laptop, hoping that maybe they *did* figure out web sites after all. It turns on with gratifying swiftness and reveals itself to be a Windows knock-off from the nineties or something like that - with just about the same level of security. It doesn't even ask for a password! Convenient.

In a glowing example of video game redundancy created by developers being lazy, it has the exact same apps as his phone, just with a bigger keyboard. No internet, no websites, no games, nothing. And judging by the single folder on the computer, the only thing Sephiroth ever does with the thing is write mission reports. How sad.

It almost makes him miss Zhongdian.

The shops' menu comes with pictures, thankfully, so that's something - and it's conveniently hooked straight to his wallet, so all he has to do

is press *buy,* and the thing is done, just like that! Videogame shop mechanics for you. He has no idea how the purchases would be delivered, maybe he will have to go pick them up at the building lobby or something, but whatever! He needs shirts, curtains, carpets, a couch, and a proper damn tea set to start with! And maybe, if he really goes crazy with it, some *house plants!*

Guessing at his size by using the tags on the shirts that don't fit, he puts in some dozen clothing orders for several different sizes to start with - and it barely makes a dent in his wallet. Then he scrolls through the available furniture in another store until he finds a couch big enough for Sephiroth's huge ass body to actually lie down on. Tea set is harder, there isn't one that matches his criteria, but he finds a home decor shop that sells teapots and sets of cups that will do for a start. Carpets are harder - who the hell decided that *black ceiling* was good for anyone - and ultimately he ends up choosing dark forest green.

And then he finds out that there are no live plants to be had in Midgar. There's a shop that sells *life-like plastic replicas…* but just looking at it makes him feel so sad. Because, yeah, right, he forgot.

Life-sucking megacorporation. Literally. The whole city is surrounded by dead desert, and you probably just can't keep houseplants alive in Midgar. Because Shinra is literally draining the lifeblood of the planet, and only the tragic heroine with mysterious lineage can make the flowers grow.

And he's her ultimate, poisonous antithesis. Yeah.

Depressing.

Leaning away from the disappointment of a computer, he heaves out a long sigh from Sephiroth's deep chest. The idea that he might never see living bamboo again makes him feel vaguely nauseous, and with a grimace he rests a hand on Sephiroth's washboard abs.

Energy sits like an undigested mass in his guts. He's all but bloated with the lifeblood of the planet. Ugh. He should really do… something with it, huh? Meditate at the very least.

And then the awful Feng Shui hits him in the face.

"Ah," he mutters unhappily, eyeing the room. He can almost *see* the energy pooling in the middle, *stagnating.* That can't have been helping with Sephiroth's situation. He can't do much about it yet, not without

more furniture - but he can at least move the damn bed and redirect the energy elsewhere!

Which he does.

By nearly flipping the *metal frame of a probably really heavy* bed over and almost throwing it into the wall.

Ah.

Right.

Super SOLDIER.

Tentatively he crouches down and tests his strength on the bed. By very carefully picking it up. Which is something he can do, apparently! It doesn't even *strain* him - he just puts his hands under it and lifts. Just like that. *Amazing.*

… Is this what it's like to be Liu Qingge? Wow.

He kinda feels sad for Liu-shidi now, for never getting to see - and fight - someone like Sephiroth. Poor Liu-shidi, always looking for a strong opponent to test himself against, always asking his useless shixiong for a spar, and here is his useless shixiong, in one of the greatest fighters in video game history - utterly out of reach! What a shame!

He arranges the bed away from the doorways and sits down on it with a heavy sigh.

Oh, but he will really miss Liu-shidi. The knowledge that he will never see him, or anyone else from Cang Qiong Mountain Sect again… it really is a shame. He didn't get to do enough in that life - but at least Liu Qingge survived! Hopefully… hopefully his life will be good. Hopefully Luo Binghe would forgive Cang Qiong Mountain Sect for their involvement with Shen Qingqiu, and they'd all live long, good lives… without him.

Ah, probably best not to dwell on it. He'd got a new transmigration, a new body and a new life to adjust to! New villain to embody - and a new doom to circumvent.

Kicking off his boots, he puts Sephiroth's feet up and into a lotus position, draws a breath and begins to see what he can do for the man's internal energies. Can cultivation practices be applied to Final

Fantasy VII Mako and magic?

Time to find out.

"How is he?"

"What do you think?"

Lazard gives the SOLDIER First Class a look and Genesis sniffs. "Never fear, Director - your Hero will be well fit for duty - after a break," he says.

"Sephiroth never takes breaks," Lazard points out.

That earns him another sniff, one much closer to a scoff this time. "And people wonder why he's so unapproachable," Genesis says, rolling his eyes. "Why he keeps destroying training rooms in regular spars."

"I seem to recall you and Angeal having a hand in that too," Lazard says, amused and unimpressed. "You are all still forbidden from using the training rooms."

"Yes, yes, ours is a tragic tale of woe," Genesis says dismissively. "The point I'm trying to make is that whether Sephiroth takes breaks or not, he still needs them. He might be Elite even among us Firsts - but he's still human. No matter what the professor says."

Lazard folds his arms. "So this was to be expected, is that it?"

"Wasn't it? Have you not seen Sephiroth's schedule? And I don't just mean his mission roster. He's in and out of the labs so often they should install a revolving door, just for him," Genesis scoffs and looks away. "It's a wonder he didn't start losing it before."

Lazard narrows his eyes. "Has he lost it, then, Genesis? Has he been pushed to the brink?"

Genesis is quiet for a moment and then sighs. "No," he says. "Not yet. But something happened that shook him. Apparently his heart stopped, he was given too big a dose - but I don't think that's it. Not all of it."

"It sounds plenty shocking to me."

"SOLDIERs flatline all the time. That's what Phoenix Downs are for," Genesis waves a hand at that. "Sephiroth must've gone through it a thousand times. But maybe, in combination with the higher dose he got, and however long he was dead…"

Lazard hums. "Memory issues?"

"Most definitely," Genesis agrees, and gives him a sideways look. "He'll be able to cover it up - given time. But he must've forgotten more than he was letting on. I don't know how much - but it was a lot."

Lazard hums in grim understanding, and they're quiet for a moment in shared acceptance. Memory loss in a SOLDIER is common enough, and usually isn't reason alone to pull them from the field - higher ups really didn't care. But it tends to have other detrimental effects…

Like an increased mortality rate.

SOLDIERs were sent out only on toughest of missions, taking on most dangerous assignments the company had to offer. Everything Turks or Infantry couldn't handle, the SOLDIER took care of. And going on a high-risk mission with any level of loss of mental faculties…

If Sephiroth was operating with something worse than your usual case of a few burned synapses…

"He needs to be evaluated," Lazard says finally. "Sephiroth has numerous missions coming up in Wutai - if his abilities are compromised -"

"You'll send someone else?" Genesis asks and scoffs. "That I would like to see! How will that look in the newspapers, when the poster boy is replaced? The horror, the controversy - the *conspiracy!"*

Lazard casts him a look. "Or maybe I will have to shuffle the roster to send someone *with him,"* he says pointedly.

"To babysit *Sephiroth?"*

"Better than to risk everything due to lack of foresight," Lazard muses and leans back in his chair. "Angeal will be back tomorrow - I want you to debrief him on the situation - *quietly* - and then the two of you can assess Sephiroth's condition."

"Out of the company's view, I assume?" Genesis asks while whipping out his PHS to check the calendar.

"It wouldn't do for rumours to spread," Lazard agrees and looks away. "Thankfully the Third who saw him already promised to be discreet."

Genesis hums dubiously. "We'll see how long that will last," he mutters, scrolling through his schedule. In his experience, SOLDIERs gossip worse than the secretary staff.

"I'll take even a day's delay. With the true extent of his stay in Injections suppressed and with you handling the rest, hopefully the gossip won't find enough ground to spread," Lazard says.

Genesis hums and then frowns at a new message notification. "Ah," he says, reading the title.

"Hm?" Lazard asks

"Well. Speaking of gossip," Genesis says, his brows arching. "Someone is getting fired at Laybell's."

Lazard frowns and gives him a confused look. "Laybell's? You mean the *clothing store?"*

Genesis opens the mail that had just been sent out to Silver Elite and reads it through.

SEPHIROTH JUST ORDERED A WHOLE BUNCH OF SHIRTS FROM LAYBELL'S?!? by Beybelina

Hi, hello, hey, I'm a bit of a lurker, usually I don't have anything to say, but something INCREDIBLE just happened!

I work at the Laybell's in Sector Seven and I was just processing orders when it popped up! At first I couldn't believe my eyes! The name on the order, it couldn't be! It was SEPHIROTH! I thought it was fake, so I checked - and the mailing address is Shinra HQ!

Aaaah, my heart is pounding like mad! Sephiroth, making orders from our store! This is the happiest day of my life!

There's almost instantly a reply.

Re: SHIRTS FROM LAYBELL'S by Silver Tail

OH MY GODDESS! What did he order? What kind of shirts? What colour? Tell us everything!

And then an answer to that, just as quickly…

Re:re: SHIRTS FROM LAYBELL'S by Beybelina

I have the full list, though I probably shouldn't mail it because of customer confidentiality! But let's just say it looks like he's moving in from the Glorious Coat of Greatness and Goodness and we'll all be worse for it! He will look amazing of course, but it's still a tragedy!

Genesis brows arch slightly in incredulity. What customer confidentiality? "Apparently Sephiroth has been shopping for clothes."

Lazard looks up, and Genesis shows him the message. "Hm. I agree, someone is certainly getting fired," he says dubiously. "But is it really that unusual? Everyone uses mail to shop these days."

Genesis gives him a look. "You have no idea what the state of his wardrobe is, do you?"

"I make it a point not to pry into the personal affairs of SOLDIER members," Lazard admits.

"And we're oh so grateful - but I *do,* and it's *something else,"* Genesis says flatly. He'd gotten his own leather coat because he'd gotten inspired by Sephiroth's style - only to soon realise where it actually came from.

He's never known anyone too damn haughty to get a new shirt, before Sephiroth. It would be amusing if it wasn't so irritating. Of course, there's also the fact that whenever they do as much as charge their hairstyle it's newsworthy. Sephiroth is especially sensitive to it, having been in the spotlight all his life. But mostly it was just the man being contrary on purpose, because someone said something, and sometimes Sephiroth just decides to dig his heels in about the weirdest things for no good reason. Like with the hair, oh, Goddess, the *hair.*

So the idea that Sephiroth is suddenly becoming fashion-conscious…? Highly unlikely.

Genesis scowls, snapping his PHS shut.

Lazard is right - Sephiroth really needs to be assessed, thoroughly. Because either the man has utterly lost his mind… or he's up to something.

"He's been a busy boy, our great Hero."

Angeal looks up from the Buster Sword. Genesis is leaning against the lockers, scrolling through something on his PHS. "That's how you greet a friend returned from a dangerous mission - with gossip?"

Genesis glances at him and then looks him up and down. "You're fine, your report was exemplary, and you're not yet ranting about honour and integrity. Your mission went fine, but it wasn't memorable," he says dismissively and waves a PHS. "This is much more interesting."

Angeal quirks a smile at that. "You should still ask. It shows you care."

Genesis rolls his eyes. "Very well, Angeal, tell me something about your mission I don't already know. I'm all ears."

"Why thank you for asking, Genesis, it went fine," Angeal says, arching his brows. "I'm fine, the farm is fine, the Midgar Zolom was put down. It turns out it had been injured by something prior - probably while fighting another Midgar Zolom - and it was the pain making it lash out and attack people. There was no way around it, so I had to put it down."

Genesis gives him a derisive little clap. "Marvellous, truly a tale fit for a hero - almost exactly word for word copy of your written report," he says.

Angeal grins at that. "Genesis, don't be an ass."

"Was there really any question about how monster extermination would go? Sending you out was overkill - the Seconds could've handled it," Genesis points out and waves his PHS again. "In the meantime Sephiroth bought a *couch."*

… Okay, that *is* interesting. "A *couch?"* Angeal repeats.

"Along with," Genesis turns his eyes to the PHS, "Order of some kind of household linens, at least one carpet, some kitchenware, and at minimum *a dozen* new shirts."

Angeal's eyebrows climb up. "He's… redecorating?" he asks slowly.

"That implies he ever decorated in the *first place,"* Genesis points out - which is a fair. Angeal is pretty certain everything Sephiroth owns was already there when he was assigned a room, and he's not bothered getting anything new since.

Angeal finishes the wipedown of his sword and then stands up. "Does this have something to do with his stay at the labs?"

"Does it indeed," Genesis says and snaps his phone shut. "Turns out, that *prolonged stay* at Injections was because he was given a triple dose and *died* . Our famed Hero is operating now with an unknown level of memory loss and who knows what else."

"... Sephiroth?" Angeal asks incredulously. "They overdosed *Sephiroth?"*

"Mm-hmm," Genesis agrees grimly. "And afterwards he holed himself up in The Restroom, because he forgot how to find a way back to his rooms or how to use keycards. Scared some poor Third witless. And now he's taking up home decoration."

Angeal runs a hand over his face. "So he doesn't feel comfortable at his home," he muses.

"I honestly don't know how he ever did, it can hardly be called a *home,* but that's a fair guess," Genesis agrees and puts his phone away. "He didn't even seem to recognise the place yesterday, though he was rather out of it. He's had a day to sort himself out since."

"And he's been ordering furniture," Angeal clarifies and folds his arms, thinking. "Taking command of his surroundings and exerting control."

"A basic coping mechanism," Genesis agrees. "He's been given a three day leave - two days left of it now. Lazard wants us to evaluate his status, and the sooner we do it, the better."

"Hmm," Angeal agrees and nods. The sooner they did it, the sooner they'd know what Sephiroth would need to recover. Or, failing that, how to cover up the loss. "Very well. Let's go see how he's doing."

Genesis bows him to go ahead and then follows Angeal out of the locker rooms and to the elevators.

"Never thought I'd be evaluating Sephiroth, of all people, for whether he's fit for duty or not," Genesis comments while hitting the button for the right residential floor, sounding almost resentful. "He's *the* SOLDIER."

Angeal hums in agreement. He honestly thought Sephiroth was above the usual side effects of Mako injections - he never seemed to have any issues… or maybe he was so used to it that he didn't even care anymore.

No one could call Sephiroth *well-adjusted* even in the best of circumstances.

"We'll do what we can to be there for him and help him out," Angeal says firmly. "As his friends it's our duty to see that he recovers."

"Yes, yes, it's the honourable thing to do, and so it goes," Genesis says, waving a hand dismissively and leaning back against the elevator wall with a sigh. "I just have to wonder, what will the labs do with us, if they're starting to take risks with *him?* And why? Why risk overdosing Sephiroth, of all people? He's already the strongest of all of us - why the rush to make him even stronger?"

Angeal folds his arms. That… is a good point. "Maybe the situation in Wutai is escalating," he comments.

Genesis scoffs. "There's more of us SOLDIERs than ever before, and still they stuff all their eggs in a single Sephiroth-shaped basket."

Angeal gives him a look. "That's not *Sephiroth's* fault."

Genesis shakes his head in disgust and then looks up as the elevator comes to a halt. "Well then, let's see if our Hero is worthy of the honours he's afforded."

Angeal elbows him admonishingly and Genesis elbows him back irritably, and together they walk up to Sephiroth's door.

Sephiroth opens on the second knock and looks out hopefully - only for his face to fall at the sight of them. Angeal carefully keeps his face in check and doesn't just gape like an idiot at him, but it comes *very close.*

Sephiroth's is wearing a t-shirt and - are those… pyjama pants?

"I'm guessing you're not here with the food," Sephiroth says, sounding disappointed.

Genesis is fully gaping at him. "You ordered *fast food?"* he demands. "What, did you forget where the cafeteria is?"

"... I can't order food now?" Sephiroth asks evasively, looking away.

"... You did, you *absolutely* forgot where the cafeteria is," Genesis groans, running a hand down his face and pinching the bridge of his nose. "Why didn't you - no, never mind. Did you eat at all yesterday?

And are those *pyjama bottoms?!"*

Sephiroth looks down at himself. "It's… my day off," he says then. "I'm not going anywhere, and I want to be comfy."

"I didn't even know you owned pyjamas," Genesis says, somewhere between horrified and impressed.

Sephiroth makes a face and shrugs.

Angeal mouths *comfy* to himself *,* and then schools his reaction. Clearly - clearly Genesis' concern is warranted. This is… very out of character for Sephiroth. "Everyone deserves to be comfortable in their own homes," he says and elbows Genesis again. "But perhaps we would all be *more* comfortable inside, rather than in the doorway?"

Sephiroth hums in agreement. "Fine," he says and steps back. "Come in, then."

Sharing a look, Genesis and Angeal step into what no longer even feels like Sephiroth's apartment. Everything has been rearranged, the bed, the desk, the table - there is a new couch facing the room and a carpet in front of it, and the whole room feels very different. It's not a huge difference, but…

It looks very… comfy.

"Oh my Goddess, the memory loss turned Sephiroth into a real boy," Genesis mutters and elbows Angeal urgently. "He has *curtains* now."

He does. They're translucent and green.

10-12

So much for his day off! Well, maybe expecting to get a day off so soon into a new transmigration was a bit of a big ask, but still - he'd been geared up for a day on the couch, catching up with his emails and reading through the whole tutorial section on his phone!

Which, it turns out, was actually useful once you got past the glaringly obvious and downright condescending parts. It actually explained to him where to pick up the orders he'd been making - and he'd learned a whole bunch about the SOLDIER program and the Wutai war and stuff like Materia. Very useful, and he was only halfway through it - he'd gotten distracted by the mailing lists, which were actually really interesting! Very informative in terms of lore!

There was so much to catch up on, and he'd been looking forward to a whole day of reading and meditating, now that the Feng Shui wasn't quite so rancid. If he'd known he'd end up having guests, he would've put on some actual clothes too!

Ugh, he would really miss the convenience of having disciples. Having a barrier between himself and guests let him make himself presentable, whenever his *me-time* got distributed. Never mind he could just tell them, *no, this master isn't accepting visitors at this time,* and they'd politely sent them away without him having to do anything! So useful!

And now he's here, inhabiting a Big Bad - reduced to making his own tea and everything.

"What *are* you doing?" Genesis asks, watching him dubiously.

Isn't it obvious? "I am making tea," as you should be able to tell, from the tea pot!

His guests share a pointed look, and he suppresses the urge to roll Sephiroth's eyes. Like he can't see them.

"Here, let me help you with that -" the big beefy one, Angeal, begins to say, only to stop at his scoff.

"If your tea making abilities are on par with Genesis, no thank you," he says in a tone that probably has too much Qing Jing Peak Lord and not enough One-Winged Angel in it. "I got it."

"What's wrong with my tea making?" Genesis asks. "It's *tea.* You dunk it in hot water until it becomes brown, and then you drink it."

Genesis-bro, you're lucky it's not Shen Jiu you're facing - you'd be *wearing* the tea. "Hm," the version of Shen Qingqiu that is there answers wryly and pours the first cup into the sink before carrying the pot and cups to the kitchen table.

Note to self - trays, he needs at least one tea tray.

There's an awkward, confused silence as he serves the tea. "Apologies for the lack of snacks," he says and adds, pointedly, "I wasn't expecting company."

"You never are," Genesis mutters, giving his teacup an aggravated look.

"Thank you, Sephiroth," Angeal says and accepts the cup. It looks tiny in his hands, and he doesn't seem to know what to do with it. "Is this… a Wutai practice?"

Hell if he knows, though seeing as Wutai was a sort of mishmash of Chinese and Japanese aesthetic, they probably had some kind of tea culture.

"Perhaps," he says and sips his tea. "So, what can I do for you two?"

Another look shared between them. They sip their tea and then look insultingly surprised when it's not awful.

"...I heard about what happened in the labs," Angeal says, turning the cup in his hand. "Genesis told me. Are you… alright?"

Well, his core is still a puddle of cement, and by his estimation it will be weeks of cultivation before he can work on something useful. He's stuck in the body of another villain doomed to die - and resurrect, and die, and resurrect, and die… but at least it comes with a built-in excuse for inconvenient amnesia plots! This world still doesn't have the internet - but it has fast food and online shopping! He still has a wallet full of hefty, big numbers! And, one can't forget, he's an incredibly hot beefcake of a man, strongest in the setting… at least until Cloud Strife would come along!

Compared to Shen Qingqiu, Sephiroth doesn't have much to complain about. At least he doesn't have to look forward to being torn limb from limb and tortured to slow and agonising death!

He thinks briefly of Binghe and then shakes his head.

"I'm fine," he says.

Another shared, pointed, knowing look.

"You know that's not going to cut it, right?" Genesis says, setting his cup down. "Have you figured out how much you've forgotten?"

Everything and nothing. Once more.

Awkward.

"Sephiroth," Angeal says, looking at him seriously. "We're here to help you. Please, trust us - it's our duty, as your friends, to help you."

The man looks and sounds a lot like Yue Qingyuan in that moment. Sans the guilt and indulgence, but the vibes are very familiar. And, like with Yue Qingyuan, they kind of rub him the wrong way.

"Pretty sure friendship isn't supposed to be based on *duty,"* he says, giving the man a look.

"Well, it's quicker and easier to say - and a little less likely to give you hives than the actual truth," Angeal points out.

"... Which is?"

Angeal dons on a very serious and very sincere expression. "Sephiroth," he says. "You're our friend, we're *your* friends, and we *care* about you. We're worried about you. Please believe us, we're here for you."

He instantly recoils away from that utter anime *bullshit,* and then glares as Genesis laughs at him. It's just so - ugh! "Next you will be telling me with the power of friendship I will regain my lost self," Sephiroth mutters. "Or that the first step to healing is accepting I have a problem. What is this, a damn intervention?" Oh, shit, maybe this is the Kingdom Hearts version after all!

"Goddess, don't give him ideas!" Genesis snorts. "His lectures are bad enough already!"

Angeal looks a little relieved, for some reason, and leans back. "And so my point is made," he says, satisfied, and folds his arms. "And my question still stands. Are you, really, alright?"

Ugh. "I feel fine."

"But are you? Are you fit for duty? If they send you to Wutai, will you be alright?"

Oh. *Oh* , that would be convenient, if he could use this whole thing as an excuse not to go! "If I say no, they won't send me to Wutai?"

Angeal frowns, hesitant.

"Oh, they'll still send you. But maybe not alone," Genesis says. "Probably one of us, or a bunch of Seconds, will be sent as your backup. But we'll still need to know what we might be covering you for."

He's not sure what that means, and it must show on his face, because Angeal explains. "If you, for example, have forgotten certain protocols… whoever goes in as your second will need to know when to step in."

Oh. "That seems…" he's not actually sure. Kinda bad? "If I don't know the protocols, then I shouldn't go, surely?"

"Oh, to see the day when reason and logic will find footing in Shinra military," Genesis sighs and shakes his head. "You could've had your brain completely fried, and they'll still send you, so long as you can still fight. Hell, they'll send you just to look pretty, even if you can't!"

… well, great, that's just great.

Angeal looks worried . *"Can* you still fight?"

Fight? Yes, probably. Fight *like Sephiroth?* Hmm…

He looks at the sword in the stand, now placed strategically so that it directs the room's energy properly. It has at least half a metre on Xiu Ya, and it's curved besides. And, obviously, it's not a spiritual sword.

"Perhaps we should find out," Genesis suggests, a gleam in his eyes. "Right. Who's up for sneaking into the company training room?"

Well, at least Sephiroth knows better than to run around the Shinra building in a t-shirt and pyjama pants - which, while no doubt amusing, would've caused far too much chaos to be worth it.

While Angeal is putting away the remains of Sephiroth's fast food, Genesis gives the man himself an assessing eye.

The shirt he'd picked up, dark green turtleneck, works well enough with the usual coat. The outfit would need some more matching accents to really work - there's too much black and grey, they overpower the slight splash of colour - but at least it doesn't clash with anything. However… It's obvious there's simply not enough space in the sleeves of Sephiroth's coat for a full-sleeved shirt.

The leather creaks in *agony* when Sephiroth moves his arm, and his bicep bulges accordingly.

"Couldn't find a new coat, then?" Genesis asks, resting a hand at his hip.

Sephiroth tugs at his cuffs unhappily and bows his head, saying nothing. That's a no then.

Well. As weird as it is that memory loss gave Sephiroth the kick he needed to exercise some self-care, Genesis isn't about to look a gift chocobo in the talons. "I'll mail you the details of the shop where I got mine. They don't do mail order, everything is bespoke, but well worth the effort."

"Mn. My thanks," Sephiroth says, considers his gloves, and pushes them into a pocket. He then picks up his sword, and holds it by its sheath at his side. "Shall we?"

"You know Lazard isn't going to be happy about this," Angeall comments idly, putting the trash in the garbage. "I'm pretty sure he banned us from using the training room, permanently."

"What he doesn't know can't come to bite us in the ass," Genesis says dismissively. "And besides, we're supposed to be evaluating Sephiroth! Surely we must be thorough about it."

Angeal shakes his head, amused, and looks at Sephiroth, now fully dressed, with a shirt. He looks relieved. "Let's go."

They head out, Sephiroth trailing after them and clearly trying to cover up the fact that he has no idea where they're going.

"Floors 49 to 51 are dedicated to the SOLDIER program," Genesis says, once they're safely in the elevator. "49 is training and equipment, 50 has a gym and gear storage, and 51 is SOLDIER offices - Lazard office

is up there too. We're heading to 49, where the training room is."

Catching his meaning, Angeal adds, "Floor 49 also has a briefing room, it's where we acquire most of our missions."

Sephiroth looks at them sideways through his bangs silently for a moment before nodding ever so slightly. "I see."

He really doesn't remember *any* of it? Damn. "You don't usually hang around on the SOLDIER floors, outside receiving missions," Genesis says, looking at Angeal and arching his brows. "You're not usually around much."

"Mn."

"I think you go to the Records sometimes in your downtime," Angeal offers, clearing his throat and arching his brows to Genesis. "Floor 58. It houses the Shinra public archives."

"Well, *public,"* Genesis says, shrugging. "You need a keycard to access it and a high enough security level to actually take anything out, and of course none of the *really* classified files are accessible. And their drama section is *abysmal* ."

Sephiroth hums, looking between them suspiciously. "A library, then?"

"If you want to call it that. Midgar Public Library has better variety - and a little less propaganda - but I imagine you've never been," Genesis sniffs and looks at him.

"Ah," Sephiroth says, wary.

"You'd be swarmed there," Genesis clarifies. "By the grateful and adoring public."

Sephiroth shifts his weight at that and says nothing, looking uncomfortable.

Angeal hides how troubled he is well, as he faces Sephiroth, but Genesis can hear it in his voice. "The cafeteria, by the way, is on floor 61," he says. "It's not usually too bad, and people tend to leave members from other departments alone."

"Or you can pay the cafeteria staff under the table to deliver," Genesis muses and looks up as the elevator comes to a stall. "Right, I'll go see that the coast is clear. Angeal -"

"We'll just wait here," Angeal says, knowing, and looks at Sephiroth - who is very much not ready to be jumped on by an excited baby SOLDIER asking for pointers.

"Then off I go, to face the beasts," Genesis says and sets forth.

It's a well-practised routine at this point, to subtly chase away any wayward SOLDIER Second Class members from the training room. Mostly it just involves him walking in and making his presence known - Seconds tend to know to make way.

Thirds are trickier, because they're often too new to know better - but SOLDIER Thirds don't have access to the training room anyway.

"Genesis, sir," a Second Class he's sometimes trained with, Kunsel, sidles up to him. "It's it true? About Sephiroth?"

Well, at least he knows to keep his voice down. "Is what true about Sephiroth?" Genesis asks, narrowing his eyes.

"I heard he was hanging around in Injections," Kunsel says carefully and adds, "In The Restroom?"

It really took them only a day, huh.

"Sephiroth? In The *Restroom?* Really," Genesis says as though excited and leans in. "When? Did someone see him?"

"Um, yesterday?" the Second Class says, also leaning in a little. "It was one of the Third Classes."

"... Oh," Genesis answers, affecting disappointment. "I see. Well, I'm pretty sure Sephiroth was at home yesterday."

"... Really?"

"Saw him myself," Genesis assures him with a shake of his head and rests a hand at his hip. "You said it was a Third Class who spotted him? Well. I wouldn't want to call them a *liar,* but… they were probably coming out of the procedure themselves. And you know how it is with Mako injections."

Kunsel hums in thought, looking a little troubled. "I do, sir," he says and shakes his head. "It did seem a bit weird."

"You should talk to the Third," Genesis says. "They're probably really convinced they saw something, and maybe they did - but it still

wouldn't do to spread stories like that. That's only good for ruining someone's reputation."

"No sir, you're right. I'll talk to him," the Second Class says seriously and nods. "I'll take care of it."

"Good man - maybe take them out on some easy mission, get their mind off it," and get them out of the building for a bit. "It's not their fault. Mako plays tricks on us all."

With Kunsel and hopefully the rumours thus fended off, the coast to the training room is clear. Genesis heads to the elevators, where Angeal is casually poking at the floor button.

"Showtime," Genesis says and looks at Sephiroth. "Time to see if you're still worthy of being a Hero."

Sephiroth clenches his hand around Masamune's sheath and gives him a weird look. "A hero?" he asks incredulously. "Me?"

… Oh. That's…

"Don't worry," Angeal says quickly, clapping Sephiroth on the shoulder. "We'll help you remember." But he looks worried too.

"Or else, take your place," Genesis says, but the taunt lacks its usual sting as he shares a look with Angeal.

This… might be even worse than they thought.

Sephiroth is the best swordsman in SOLDIER. It's what the entirety of the SOLDIER program has been built upon - that superhuman excellence that Sephiroth brings to the table, blowing the curve for everyone who came before and everyone who would come after.

The program had technically existed before Sephiroth, but it wasn't the same. The early SOLDIERs used Materia, and they were enhanced with Mako, but the treatments hadn't quite reached their full potential. Not just because of the fact that the program was in its infancy and the practicalities of Mako-enhanced strength hadn't yet been worked out - but because of… attitude.

They were still stuck in the old ways of thinking about combat.

Early SOLDIERs used firearms, for one - the heavier the better. They wore armour and carried heavy loads of equipment. They were walking tanks. The use of melee weapons wasn't really common, outside very specialised circumstances. The most a SOLDIER might use was a combat knife.

Then healing Materia research got better. Potions were developed. Barrier Materia became more commonplace. SOLDIERs got tougher… and bullets became less lethal and more an annoyance.

Still, it wasn't until the start of the Wutai War that the use of swords started really spreading among SOLDIERs. Wutai warriors did it first, in the opposite direction - they added firearms to their blades. And then Sephiroth, fourteen years old at the time, entered the field, and changed everything.

He picked up a Wutai blade - and ravaged the enemy forces with it. He's favoured folded steel and curved Wutai swords ever since - and by doing so he changed the SOLDIER program for good.

Angeal has studied the start of the war and the progress that had been made during it thoroughly - like most everyone in the program who had ever had aspirations of becoming First, he'd studied Sephiroth's career. Hell, he'd been doing it even before he joined the program, before he even left his hometown Banora for Midgar. His research is part of the reason why his father ended up working himself to death over the Buster Sword.

Sephiroth, like all SOLDIERs, is strong. He's *fast.* He has magic floating in his veins. And that's usually enough. Even the weakest SOLDIER is faster and stronger than the most dedicated martial artist, that's how Shinra made them, and that's what most of their training still focuses on.

But that wasn't enough for Sephiroth. From the very first time he picked up the blade, he strove to *master* it. Among the SOLDIER program, Sephiroth is the most *learned* when it comes to swordsmanship. He actually sought out teachers in Wutai, challenging their best to duels and learning everything he could from them, paying for that tutelage in blood if he had to. Now he can not only swing his sword faster and harder than anybody else - he also knows *how* and never relies just on his enhancements to do the work for him.

Unbeknownst to most, the entirety of SOLDIER melee and

swordsmanship training is based on Sephiroth. He'd taught all of them everything they know, either through recordings of his practice sessions or in duels. There were even rumours that they were making an AI model of Sephiroth to teach newer SOLDIERs in virtual training.

A single duel with Sephiroth is worth a dozen training sessions with anyone else, when it comes to swordsmanship. Even a virtual mockup would be better than the next best swordsman in the company.

And if Sephiroth has lost even a fraction of that mastery…

Angeal folds his arms, watching worriedly as Sephiroth unsheathes his sword. It looks… clumsy. Like he doesn't know even how to do it right. The over-long blade and the equally lengthy sheath actually give him *trouble,* and he looks frustrated with them

The sinking feeling in Angeal's gut develops to actual nausea, and he glances to his side, where Genesis is leaning back against the training room wall. He'd seen it too - Genesis' gloves creak as he squeezes his sword hilt, his face tight with unease.

"Let's… start easy, okay?" Angeal says, turning back to Sephiroth. "With some warmups."

"Warmups," Genesis echoes like it's a foreign language.

Angeal elbows him. They usually never bother warming up, they don't really need it, but just launching right into it like they usually do would be a… bad idea. "Sephiroth," Angeal nods, motioning to the centre of the room, "How about some target practice?"

Sephiroth is slowly swinging his sword, trying to get used to Masamune's length. "Depends on what you mean by target practice," he says, frowning at the sword and the Materia in the hilt.

In answer, Angeal takes out his PHS and activates the training room, summoning up a handful of hard-light targets - in the style of Wutai troops. They stand in loose formation near the middle of the room, three faceless armoured figures in a line.

"Oh?" Sephiroth hums, quiet and tense.

"No combat settings," Angeal assures him. "They're only there as training dummies. Just have a swing at them."

"... Right,"Sephiroth says and slowly approaches the holograms.

"This is so utterly bizarre," Genesis mutters under his breath as Sephiroth turns to face the holograms. "I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe we might actually have to *teach Sephiroth* how to swing a sword."

"Shhh," Angeal hisses. "Maybe it's like riding a chocobo."

"Or maybe we're all utterly screwed," Genesis hisses back. "If Sephiroth can't *fight…"*

… Yeah.

Sephiroth makes a few idle test swings with Masamune as he faces the hard-light targets, looking a little awkward and self-conscious. Then he takes a stand. It looks halfhearted at best.

"Oh, Goddess. I know I always said I wanted to be a greater hero than Sephiroth, but *not like this,"* Genesis bemoans, running a hand down his face. "This is a disaster. The secondhand embarrassment alone -"

Sephiroth tilts his head towards them. "You know I can hear you, *right?"* he asks, his tone acidic.

Angeal wraps his arm around Genesis' shoulder and quickly covers his mouth. "Just ignore him," he said. "Go right ahead, pretend we're not even here."

Sephiroth straightens up again, looking irritated and embarrassed, turning his face away. He fiddles with Masamune's handle for a moment, and Angeal has to actually put some effort in holding Genesis quiet, all but taking him into a full headlock - and his friend is still letting out loud, outraged noises behind his palm.

Finally, Sephiroth lets out a sigh and swings Masamune once. It's too fast to follow.

The holograms shatter like glass.

Well… that looked familiar?

"Oh?" Sephiroth murmurs, curious, and looks at the sword in his hands. Then he swings the sword again, differently, testing it. And then again, moving from one swing to another smoothly and almost too fast to follow, shifting his grip as he does.

Genesis goes quiet and Angeal holds his breath.

"Oh, *well now,"* Sephiroth murmurs interestedly, his expression lighting up as he takes Masamune in a one-handed grip, making a little jab with it. "I wonder…"

Genesis wrings himself free of Angeal's hold. "So you do remember how to use a sword!" he says and draws his own sword. "Shall we see how well?"

"Genesis," Angeal objects, but Genesis is already skipping ahead.

Sephiroth pauses, running a hand down Masamune's blade. Then he swings the sword down sharply, confidently. "Alright," he says with a whole new gleam in his eyes. He looks almost excited. He looks like *himself*. "Let's do it."

Angeal sighs, half troubled, halt heartened. Sephiroth looks a little more self-assured now, at least. That's something. Maybe his memory loss isn't so -

And then Sephiroth holds his sword up in front of him and *bows,* and Genesis almost trips over his feet in shock.

Ah. Well.

Baby steps.

13-15

Sephiroth has a *really* good body! So fast and strong! The force he can put into the simplest attacks is amazing!

It really is like he's suddenly possessing Liu Qingge - with decades of training and bodybuilding and power at his fingertips. He's almost jealous, and a little bit offended! If this is anything like what Liu-shidi is working with, ah - where was he coming from, asking his scholar shixiong for spars, huh?! As if Shen Qingqiu could match this!

Shen Qingqiu was a spiritual cultivator - his sword seals were stronger than his actual combat abilities, so that's what he mostly stuck to, letting his very capable sword do the talking. Especially with Without a Cure sapping his strength. Liu Qingge had tried to teach him, and he'd really tried to learn too, he'd thought he'd need all the advantages he could get when Luo Binghe came back, but, ah, he just didn't have it in him to train like that. It was so much work!

It's so *effortless* now, pulling off moves he'd learned as Shen Qingqiu but never quite had the physical strength to execute properly. He feels weightless and without barriers, like there's nothing, no gravity, no physical limitations, *nothing* that could get in his way!

Not even Genesis.

"What the hell was *that?!"* the man demands, sprawled on the floor, staring up at him in deep offence.

Sephiroth is a villain, so smiling smugly is alright. "Your form is off," he says and swings his ridiculous beautiful Japanese blade down, until it almost touches the floor. "You need to work on your footing."

The sword is his biggest hindrance, honestly - followed closely by the too tight coat. It's not just the length of the blade, but the design. He's used to Shen Qingqiu's Xiu Ya, which is a two-edged straight *jian* sword, never mind the fact that it's a spiritual weapon. Masamune can't even be compared to a *dao* sword - which Shen Qingqiu had occasionally helped his disciples with, but which he'd never been particularly comfortable with.

The blade of Masamune is much thinner and more flexible than he's used to, and he really has to wonder how it hasn't been broken or at least chipped against Genesis' straighter, heftier sword. Those were

some heavy blows!

Actually…

Genesis jumps to his feet and swings his sword. "Again," he demands.

"Hang on a moment," Sephiroth says, considering his sword at length. Running a bare hand along the blade finds no dents, and the edge is as sharp as it was in the beginning. No chips. That's… impossible, right? It's just a *katana* blade. It's not a spiritual sword, it can't even heal itself.

Although it does have three marbles of Materia in its hilt. And there is something… it's not Qi, but there's *something.* The sword isn't *exactly* lifeless.

Lifting Masamune up, he sends a small fraction of Sephiroth's massive, sluggish spiritual power into the blade, and - ah. It lights up with something similar to a sword glare. How interesting! That makes sense, since weapons like these are how people channel magic here. And he does recall a lot of sword beam types of attacks from the games!

"Do not throw that my way," Genesis says, holding his sword in front of him in a guard. "I will answer in kind, Sephiroth, I swear to Goddess."

"I wasn't about to," he answers with a snort and draws his energy back. Now that he's looking for it, he can still sense it.

So, Masamune is subtly drawing on his energy. It's not exactly how a spiritual weapon would do it, but it's… similar. Passive and constant. Hm. Maybe something to do with the metal itself? Fascinating - are all Materia-imbued weapons like this?

"Is Masamune alright?" Angeal asks worriedly, coming forward. "Did something happen?"

"It's fine," Sephiroth answers and lowers the sword. He nods to Genesis. "And yours?"

"The Rapier is just fine," Genesis says, swinging it as though shaking dirt if it. "No need to worry."

The… Rapier? "That is *not* a rapier."

"No, it's a broadsword, and I thought it was funny," Genesis sniffs and holds it straight up. "Rapier sounds more elegant. Mine is a weapon of finesse."

That's… surprisingly lighthearted for someone so dramatic. Well, he'd seen worse names for swords. And people.

"Now, again?" Genesis asks, swinging the sword challengingly down. "Or do you want to jump in, Angeal?"

"I think I'll watch a little bit more," Angeal says, stepping back again. "Remember, no magic."

"Yes, yes," Genesis says and holds his… Rapier in a guard. "Ready when you are, Sephiroth."

Taking in the man's posture with Shen Qingqiu's expert eye, he hums. "If you say so, Genesis," he says and shifts to a stance.

Now that he has some sense of his own energy running through Masamune, he has a much better grasp of the length and the curve. With it he dares to go a little faster, not having to worry about overreacting and hurting his opponent. He can also almost sense Genesis' sword now, and predict its movements.

It makes for a very short spar indeed.

"What the hell -" Genesis grumbles, again on the floor, and glares up at him. "Are you *toying* with me right now?!"

Heh. Kind of! "Your footing," he answers in his best villainous drawl, "Is weak."

"My footing is fine!"

"Then why are you on the floor?"

Genesis mutters a curse and stands up, gripping Rapier's handle tightly. "Smug son of a bitch - I am going to end your legend here and now!"

The man attacks without warning, and it's such bad etiquette that Shen Qingqiu comes fully to the forefront. He ducks past Genesis' attack and whacks him on the butt with the flat of his sword in admonishment - and then, for a good measure, kicks his feet from under him.

"Footing," he says lazily while Genesis sputters at him in outraged offence - once more on the floor. "You let your sword's weight lead you too much. I know the blade is heavy and willful and wants to get its way - but you are the one guiding the blade, it's not supposed to be leading you."

Genesis gapes at him. "What the hell are you *talking about?!"*

They're not spiritual swords, not exactly, so… "May I?" he motions at Rapier.

Genesis glares at him warily and stands up. He shares a confused, incredulous look with Angeal and then flips Rapier over, holding it out handle first.

Shifting Masamune to his off hand and holding it out of the way behind his back, Sephiroth takes Rapier, tests the weight, and then assumes the posture Genesis led with.

"You might have the strength to swing this thing around however you will, but the laws of leverage are still in effect," he explains. "This is a very heavy sword, and unless you weigh considerably more than you look, it *will* mess with your balance if you don't counteract it. When you swing," he demonstrates, "right now you are stepping up to follow the swing, and so you're taking out your base of balance. And so you trip."

Genesis just stares at him, face completely blank.

"Now, from the beginning, properly this time," Shen Qingqiu continues and demonstrates. "Plant your feet. Bend your knees. The movement begins from the *ground ,* not your hand. From feet, up your legs, your hips, up the torso, to your arm. Feet stay on the ground. And… *swing."*

He swings the Rapier, a sweeping attack fit to take someone's head off. "Now, if you have to adjust to an opponent's block or attack, you can, because your wrist is still neutral - see? Like this I can easily adjust the angle of my swing without losing my footing, or the power of the attack."

Angeal slowly joins them while Genesis is still just staring blankly. They're both staring.

Feeling suddenly like he'd overstepped, Sephiroth hands the Rapier back and clears his throat. "So, as I said, *footing.* It's the same with

your thrust," he mutters, looking away. "Don't just throw your whole body behind it like an idiot."

Genesis accepts the broadsword back dully and looks at Angeal. There's a moment of tense silence, and Sephiroth kinda wants to sink into the floor.

Awkward.

Well. Good news is, Sephiroth hadn't forgotten how to fight. Bad news is, he's somehow a *better* fighter with amnesia!

Of course he is! The great Hero can't go through a debilitating setback without somehow gaining a power-up! He doesn't know how to navigate the building anymore and has probably forgotten about eighty percent of everything he's ever known - but it's only brought to the forefront what's always been the only real thing that matters!

The gap between them seems only to be widening, and it's somehow made worse by the fact that Sephiroth isn't trying to stride away, aloof in his distant perfection - instead he's standing on the other end of the ravine, shouting encouragement back at them!

It's infuriating!

Not enough that Genesis can't take advantage of it, though. Sephiroth might have a brain injury that has given him a complete personality overhaul, and sure, abusing his confused good will is probably wrong.

But Genesis is not going to be tripped in a fight again.

"There, that's better," Sephiroth says with smug satisfaction, at the end of a lightning fast sequence of blows that had left Genesis with aching wrists and shaking hands. "Much more sturdy."

"Yes, yes, very good," Genesis grits through clenched teeth. "But, you know, in real fights you can't just plant your feet and never move. That just makes you a sitting duck."

"You learn to stand first and walk next," Sephiroth says, and without warning gives his knee a sharp *whack* with the flat of Masamune's blade. Genesis startles - but stays on his feet. "Good! Well done."

Something about hearing *Sephiroth* praise him for his effort is just - it

feels like he's doing something wrong, just by being on the receiving end.

"As dusk falls and night begins its inexorable descent, I too grow weary," Genesis mutters, running a hand down his face. He needs a shower and a drink and a night in with a good book. "I'm done. Angeal, your turn."

"I don't think planting my feet will help with the Buster Sword," Angeal says with a laugh and comes forward. "It's half of my weight, there's no stopping it from dragging me around. But it was very interesting to watch!"

Sephiroth hums, considering him and the sword on his back. "How *do* you fight with a sword like that?" he asks, checking Masamune's edge with a bare finger.

"Well -"

"He doesn't," Genesis scoffs. "Not if he can help it."

"Well, there aren't that many situations where a blade like this is called for," Angeal says defensively. "Besides, it's a precious heirloom and I don't want it to be damaged."

"It's a fifty kilo hunk of steel!" Genesis scoffs. "It would take a bomb to even put a scratch on it!" Even Sephiroth looks dubious. "Admit it, the thing is just impossible to fight with."

Angeal scratches his cheek and then shrugs. "There are pretty much only two things you can do with it," he admits ruefully. "Swing it down or swing it across. It's not exactly versatile."

Sephiroth looks at him strangely. "... Why carry around a sword you never use?" he asks.

"It was made by my father," Angeal explains, taking the Buster Sword from his back and holding it up. "I don't know why it was so important to him, but it was. He went into debt to make it, and… he never made it out of that debt. After all that I can't just leave it behind, even if I can't use it."

"... I see," Sephiroth says, considering him thoughtfully.

"What I don't understand is why he made it so damned big," Genesis scoffs, reaching over to flick a finger at the thing. It doesn't even ring.

"It's like he was giving you an impossible task."

Angeal's smile turns a little strained. "Well. He did say it was the symbol of our family's honour."

"... Your family's honour is an unwieldy sword you can't fight with," Sephiroth clarifies.

Genesis scoffs with agreement. "A useless weight on his back he can't ever let go of."

"Wow."

Angeal looks at them, stricken, and then laughs. "That's why I use my fists!" he says with forced cheer and lowers the sword. "I don't mind the weight."

"Uh-huh," Sephiroth agrees and then considers the Buster Sword. "... Would you fight with it, if you knew how to do more than two things with it?"

Angeal hesitates. "I don't know. I guess it depends on what else is there."

Sephiroth nods in understanding and narrows his eyes. "Can I have a try?"

"Uh… alright," Angeal says slowly and hefts the massive sword up to hold it by the flat of its blade. "If you're sure. Here."

"Hold this for me," Sephiroth says, holding Masamune out to Genesis, before grabbing the Buster Sword. He looks surprised - and then *thrilled* - by the weight, hefting it up and down in his hand with a gleam of excitement in his eyes.

The sacrileges continue, Genesis thinks to himself, eyeing the sword Sephiroth had *never* let anyone touch, and goes to pick up Masamune's sheath.

Then, together with Angeal, he steps back to watch Sephiroth *figure out* the Buster Sword by doing slow swings and swipes and slashes with it. Within just a few minutes, he is already doing moves that actually look like *moves*, rather than just awkward helpless flailing, using his whole body to make the blade dance to his tune. It's not exactly graceful, there's no way to move gracefully with a weapon like the Buster Sword - but soon it has a recognizable flow and rhythm.

It looks like a deadly and brutal dance.

"Is it wrong of me to be excited about this?" Angeal murmurs, folding his arms. "To feel a little… grateful?"

"Probably," Genesis mutters resentfully. "Don't let that stop you. Because I sure won't."

Sephiroth rolls the Buster Sword over his shoulder, into an arching swing that covers whole full three-sixty sweep and then brings it around again for another attack, a move that looks deceptively easy and effortless - and utterly unlike anything Angeal, with more than half a dozen years with the sword, had ever managed. Ten minutes with a sword unlike any other, and Sephiroth already has developed what looks like a martial arts move.

Angeal looks like he can't even breathe, watching it, and Genesis runs a hand over his face.

The amnesia might've turned Sephiroth into some form of savant. That's… might actually be worse than if he'd only forgotten just about everything. The company would absolutely abuse this - and there would be idiots who, if they knew how it happened, would try to repeat the experiment.

"Dreams of the morrow hath the shattered soul," he says quietly.

Angeal glances at him and hums, folding his arms. He says nothing.

Genesis sighs as the future dawns upon them ever darker and the skill gap grows. Unfortunately, there might not be much they can do - only ride the wave that might lift all their ships to sea… or crash them on the shoreline.

"I'm going to find every single SOLDIER Second that's ever asked for tutoring sessions from me, and I'm going to throw them at Sephiroth," he swears.

Angeal laughs quietly, his eyes back on Sephiroth. "They'll have to get in line."

Angeal has never been quite as aware of the exact dimensions of the Buster Sword as he is now, heading up to Lazard's office. Though the

weight has become almost a part of him, a comforting presence on his back, it feels like… more.

He'd not quite resigned himself to possessing and carrying a sword he couldn't really use - it was just something that… was. It was a legacy of sorts, and there was nothing all that burdensome about it. But it still was a fact - the Buster Sword was one of a kind, and even studying the records of Sephiroth's masterful swordplay would never help him manage it. There was no one and nothing that could teach him how to use something that was, most likely, designed to be nigh unusable.

But apparently Sephiroth himself could.

"No," the man had said after half an hour of doing things with the sword Angeal never could've figured out on his own. "You can't fight with it like with a more reasonably-sized sword. But you *can* fight with it. Question is… do you want to?"

Does he want to, huh.

"Come in," Lazard calls at his knock, and Angeal steps into the man's office. "Angeal, good. Want to explain the rumours of Genesis' chasing Seconds out of floor 49?"

Angeal clears his throat, smiling a little. "Well. We didn't wreck the training room this time?" he offers, taking the chair in front of Lazard's desk and flipping it backward.

"You three were banned from using it for a reason," Lazard points out flatly.

"And yet we were asked to assess Sephiroth's capabilities. Hard thing to do, without fighting him," Angeal says and sits down, straddling the backrest between his knees and sighing. "Not that there was much of a fight."

Lazard's expression darkens. "So his abilities took a hit."

"Worse," Angeal admits. "He stopped holding back. At all."

"... He'd been holding back?"

"All his life, I expect," Angeal admits. "For… understandable reasons, considering his upbringing. Whatever personal reasons Sephiroth had to hide the full extent of his abilities, he's forgotten them."

"Hmm," Lazard hums, watching him closely. "And yet he didn't trash the training room, again?"

"No, just our confidence," Angeal laughs ruefully and shakes his head. "Sephiroth just spent two hours schooling us in the basics of swordsmanship. Literally - he gave us a tutoring session."

Lazard blinks and then leans back. "Well," he says, sounding surprised. "That's certainly…"

"Out of character?" Angeal asks with an arched brow. "You have no idea. When Genesis told me his memory had taken a hit, I was expecting him to show the usual signs. Confusion, reticiece, defensiveness, antisociality… and he did, to some extent. But nothing like I was expecting - and then we got to the training room, and it was like a switch was flicked."

"Memory recalled?" Lazard muses.

"Maybe. Mostly I think it was just that he found something he knew, really knew, in his bones," Angeal says. "He might've forgotten who knows how much about his life - but not how to fight. And since he's lost whatever motivation he had for holding back… it looks a lot like he just got a lot better."

Lazard hums. "And that might be a problem," he concluded darkly. "Should people take the wrong idea from it."

"Oh yeah," Angeal agrees.

"Where is Sephiroth now?"

"Genesis took him out of the building - they're going clothes shopping."

"... Genesis and *Sephiroth?"*

Angeal grins. "Sephiroth has become aware that his coat doesn't fit comfortably," he explains. "And Genesis knows the best tailor in the city, apparently."

"If it's the same one I use, he does," Lazard says, fiddling with his cuff and then leaning back. "Alright, so we don't have to worry about Sephiroth not being fit to fight. Just the… implications and rumours of his current status. Maybe a solo mission to get him started…"

Angeal grimaces. "I don't know if leaving him to his own devices is the right call here," he says.

"He's always been a solo fighter," Lazard comments.

"To no one's benefit. And he's lost a lot of memories."

Lazard concedes the point there with a sigh. "Well, you and Genesis have known him longer than I. I bow to your superior insight. How do you suggest we proceed?"

"A joint mission, something simple, monster extermination in the slums, maybe. There's never a shortage of that," Angeal says. "Sephiroth with Genesis or myself. Depending on how that goes… well, Genesis suggested throwing a bunch of Seconds at Sephiroth."

The director looks up. "... How do you mean?"

"Students, cadets, a squad. Whatever," Angeal explains, folding his arms. "Someone to *teach.* And I have to say I agree. Sephiroth seemed to really enjoy schooling us, and he seemed the most like himself when he was doing it."

Plus, Angeal knows from experience that teaching is the best way to learn, really. That's how he'd risen in ranks just ahead of Genesis - because the Thirds and the other Seconds kept asking him for pointers. Nothing quite like having someone relying on you to make you rise to the occasion, is there?

"He's never offered to lead a squad," Lazard points out.

"And there were probably reasons for that," Angeal agrees. "Whether he remembers those reasons anymore is a different question. It's worth consideration."

"But don't you think that will just make the rumours worse?" Lazard asks, leaning forward again and steepling his hands. "Making him interact with other members of SOLDIER?"

Angeal shrugs. "Sephiroth's different now," he says. "And with all due respect, I don't think that's something we can hide long term. Thankfully, not a lot of people know him that well," he mutters and then adds, "It would be a great thing for the SOLDIER program, if Sephiroth taught even one personal student. He is, after all, the best of us."

He's not quite as bitter about it as Genesis, but… seeing Sephiroth use the Buster Sword like he'd been doing it for years almost made him cry. So there's that.

Lazard draws a slow breath and then exhales. "I'll get you your monster extermination in the slums, after Sephiroth's leave ends," he says and turns to his computer. "We'll discuss the rest after."

"That works. Thank you, director," Angeal says and stands up.

Lazard nods and then asks, "How is he? What's your honest opinion?"

It's a little too soon to say, but there's only one answer, really. "He'll be fine," Angeal promises and turns to leave.

Sephiroth would be fine. They'd make sure of it.

16-19

Though Shen Yuan had played Final Fantasy VII and Crisis Core way back when, mostly because emulation was easily available and everyone praised them a lot, he'd never really gotten that into it. He'd sort of missed the hype train, and all the hot takes had already been taken, and Advent Children was kinda weird and overall it just didn't grab him.

But he has to admit that Midgar is a really cool setting.

It's *dumb,* of course, like, on every logistical level. *Oh, look, there's thousands of kilometres of free real estate in every direction to build on, but you know what we should do? A massive fuck off blast plate of million billion tons of metal fifty metres of the ground, that's what we'll do, and we'll build a city in top of it too!*

Like, *why?!* In what realm even remotely attached to sanity does that make sense?! Is there something wrong with the ground, is there an issue of sudden mega floods, or something? No, it's just. A thing they did!

Logic and sanity aside, though, it's *cool* , as a videogame setting, it's very cool. With the rule of cool there's no reason for, you know, reason. It's *iconic.*

And it's the closest thing to a modern city he's seen in - in a while! And, damn, but the scale of everything in real life is so much bigger than any of the games conveyed.

It's a real city! With real city traffic and bustle and dystopian advertisements everywhere! There's also an ever present haze of pollution that gives all the neon signs a dreamy glow. It's almost pretty.

And it's only powered by the lifeblood of the planet, too. Technically the souls of the dead! Wonderful.

"Please stop gaping at everything like a damned tourist and get in. People are starting to stare."

Sephiroth looks down to the car that had just stopped in front him on the sidewalk. Genesis had told him to get to the front, that he'd meet him there, but…

Genesis has a *car*. It shouldn't be a surprise, the guy is rich and the city is big, but it is. It's a really nice car too. A fucking oldtimey *wine red* convertible. It matches Genesis' outfit. How extra can you get?

"... Do I have a car?" Sephiroth asks slowly, rather than point out how ridiculous and in character it is.

"You have a motorcycle you never use," Genesis says, sounding tired. "Get in."

Sephiroth has a motorcycle. Of course he does.

He opens the convertible's side door and is immediately smacked in the face with a mix of nostalgia and incredulity at the old familiar feeling of something so simple as a car door mechanism at his fingertips. The seat is too much in the front for Sephiroth's long legs, but the seat goes back, and that's a familiar feeling too. Kind of.

He always had to pull his seat forward, rather than back.

Swallowing the sudden, long suppressed homesickness for a world he's two transmigrations away from, Sephiroth looks for a seatbelt. There isn't one. Hooray for corporate dystopia.

Genesis joins the four lane traffic in front of the Shinra building with the reckless expertise of a man who drives a lot in the city, and hates it almost as much as he loves his car.

"How far is it?" Sephiroth asks, trying to figure out where to put his hands. It's a really nice car, and it looks polished, inside and out.

He can't believe he's in *a car*. He can't believe he's in a world with cars again. He also can't believe how badly the games conveyed the scale of Midgar.

"Sector Six," Genesis says and glances at him. "You're looking a little green there, are you feeling alright? Don't throw up in my car."

"I'm fine," he's really starting to get sick of saying it. "Stop fussing."

"Who's fussing! I just don't want you to make a mess," Genesis scoffs. "Also you aren't fine. You have amnesia."

Sephiroth snorts and leans his arm on the door, looking away and at the Shinra building.

It's huge, and weird. It sorta bulges out, this lumpy mass of a building

with enormous pipes running up to it with a big barrel shape in the middle. It's the biggest building in the city, though - it's the only real skyscraper, towering over all the smaller buildings around it.

After all the metal in the Shinra building, it's weird to see brick and mortar again. Why brick and mortar? What did they run out of steel and concrete building the plate? None of the other buildings go higher than eight levels, too.

"We've covered one thing you remember perfectly. Anything else? You recognized Angeal and me, but how about anything else?" Genesis prods at him. "Hey, are you listening to me?"

Oh, he hates this. At least in Cang Qiong Mountain people were too polite to really pick on him or point out how badly he acted as Shen Qingqiu. They were nice enough to take his bullshit at face value and let it slide. Plus there was propriety to think about - none of his disciples had the standing to really call him out.

Genesis doesn't give a shit about his thin face and actually smacks him on the shoulder, "Hey!"

"What's there to say?" Sephiroth answers, because he has no answers to give. "I wouldn't know what I don't know, would I?"

Genesis sighs, irritated and stalls at the traffic lights. "And I can't tell you what to look up if you don't tell me. You must've figured out *something* by now."

"I figured I really could've used the day to myself," Sephiroth mutters and watches as a delivery truck advertising pastries runs a red light. "I don't know what you want me to say. I *don't know,* Genesis."

"Shit," the other SOLDIER says, running a hand through his hair while steering one-handed.

There's a break in the discussion as they go through a checkpoint, where the guards in infantry uniforms just wave Genesis through. The people on the sidewalk stare at Genesis' convertible, and *whisper.*

Sephiroth looks away, and then blinks at the dump truck not far away from them, also going through the checkpoint.

Weird - somehow he didn't expect Midgar to have public services. Where do they go to empty them? Do they just dump their trash down the plate?"

"So you remember… nothing?" Genesis asks as they leave the checkpoint behind

"I know - some things," Sephiroth says defensively. "But - the details escape me."

"Things like what?"

"I don't know. You, Angeal. This city. The war. Don't ask me for the President's name, but I know there is one," he sighs and leans back, watching an enormous advertisement for LOVELESS pass them by.

He also knows that sometime soon Genesis will get hurt and the wound will never heal, kick-starting the plot of Crisis Core. He has no idea when, though. He isn't even sure how to figure it out - the timeline in these games wasn't exactly clear.

"Does Angeal have a student?" he asks.

"What, like a personal student? Not that I know of," Genesis says and glances at him. "Why?"

"Ah, nothing, never mind. Must've been someone else," Sephiroth says smoothly.

So, Zack Fair, the protagonist of Crisis Core, hasn't appeared yet? Or Angeal hasn't met him. Hopefully that means there's still some time.

Genesis is quiet for a moment and then sighs. "I'll get you some intel. Personnel files for people you should know, reports from missions you've been on. The information packages handed to Thirds should help at least a little too. But Sephiroth, there's a lot about your past you've never shared, if someone asks about it…"

"I'll just say I don't want to talk about it," Sephiroth says, watching another neon lit advertisement fly by. "Thanks, Genesis."

"I expect to be compensated in full for my efforts," Genesis says firmly.

Sephiroth leans his cheek on his knuckles and wonders what Cultivation might do for the deterioration Genesis - and Angeal too - have ahead of them. "I'll do my utmost to pay back my debts."

"You better," Genesis says and turns the car from the main highway to a side road, full of expensive looking storefronts and equally expensive looking cars. "That's it over there. Let me find a place to park, and

then we can get you a coat that fits."

"Much obliged, Genesis."

The lifeblood of Shinra is power in its many forms - Mako, money, military, medical - but its nervous system is *intelligence.*

Shinra controls all the major print media, radio and television stations and has its own, not entirely public, publicity arm that makes sure that those things stay in line. It works from within the Public Service Department, of course, and it has its fingers in everything from print houses to public libraries to theatres and cinema. Very few things go out into the world without Shinra Public Service's stamp on it.

And the Department has, *always,* an ear to the ground for rumours. Everything from a Department head's illicit indulgences to lowly janitor voicing work-related complaints at a bar, Turks are often the first to know about. Some of those rumours could be ignored, others had to be suppressed, some were given a megaphone, and the rest… were dealt with according to procedure.

Whenever there's anything at all noticeable out in the wilds, the Turks *notice* . And when SOLDIER First Class takes a leave of absence, it's noticeable.

When it's *Sephiroth* , it's a potential disaster - PR, or otherwise. And the fact that he cited the *Shinra Science Department* as his reason….

Sephiroth doesn't take *time off.* He gets it assigned in the form of downtime, which he then uses to train, but he never requests it. He never takes any form of sick leave either - he doesn't *get* sick. And he rarely, if ever, cites the Science Department in any way in written form.

The man has a… notably awkward relationship with the department, what with it being run by his father. Who is, by all accounts, one of the most abusing and manipulative men in Turk records. Hm.

"First signs of a little rebellion from our Silver General," Reno suggests, lounging casually back on Tseng's office couch. "Or the first cracks in the ice?"

Tseng hums, leafing through Sephiroth's file. It's a lengthy one - even

the unclassified folder is thicker than any other SOLDIER's - but has remarkably little about Sephiroth's psychology. It was considered a non-issue, because Sephiroth was classified more as company property, rather than as an employee. Employees need to be managed - property is used or stored.

It makes it difficult to estimate, or even *guesstimate* his potential reaction - or the eventual fallout.

"They accidentally killed him with an injection," Rude comments, sitting across from Reno. "It's reasonable cause."

"Reasonable cause to lose his shit and go crazy sword killer on us all," Reno says, crossing one leg over the other. "Like that guy, what's his face - went whacko on a mission and slaughtered his whole squad in Wutai."

"No such incident occurred," Tseng says, inflectionless.

"Yes, yes, and that particular jungle burned down to the ground completely by coincidence," Reno snorts. "Just saying - that guy went through only a fraction of what Sephiroth's gone through. If the Elite among Elite is cracking, I'd like to know what happened the last time SOLDIER lost their marbles. You know, for reference."

Though a fair point, it's not a good point of reference for Sephiroth - Sephiroth is on a whole different level of dangerous.

Lowering the folder, Tseng rests his elbows on his desk and steeples his hands. "SOLDIERs look after their own," he comments, more to himself than to his underlings.

"And thank fuck for that," Reno agrees heartily. "But again, it's *Sephiroth."*

In previous cases of SOLDIER showing *especial* signs of stress, they were taken care of by other SOLDIERs. They even did a decent enough job covering up the usual issues that plagued SOLDIERs thanks to Mako injections - the side effects of memory loss were something of an open secret, but as long as it didn't affect SOLDIER effectiveness, it was being overlooked.

Usually Turks could trust SOLDIER to clean up their own messes… but sometimes a jungle had to burn. Tseng didn't really want to go poking around SOLDIER, but…

Sephiroth is more than a potential incident with massive casualties they might need to take care of. He's the face of Wutai War - and the company's second most valuable asset, right after Mako extraction technology itself. An incident simply *isn't permissible* , when Sephiroth is concerned. However… it might not be preventable, either.

Sephiroth is the only member of Shinra military that cannot be swept under the rug if he becomes an issue. Nor is there much anything they can do to control the man. Sephiroth answers to Lazard, and through him to Heidegger… but he's owned by Hojo. And Hojo barely answers to the President.

How troublesome.

"I want a full, detailed accounting of everything Sephiroth has done post-op, and everything he will do going forward, until we can safely classify him as no longer a concern," he decides. It's barely an effort to maintain control, he knows, but there's not much else that can go, with a VIP target like this.

Hopefully being watched would make the man exercise self-control - rather than make him feel controlled and all the more stressed.

"And if he loses it and starts slicing and dicing everything that moves?" Reno asks. "Because, no offence, boss, you don't pay me near enough to get in the way of *that."* Rude hums in agreement.

"I pay you enough to make sure no one important does either," Tseng says, giving him a look. "Distract, divert and minimise loss of valuable company assets. Which includes Sephiroth himself."

"What fun that will be," Reno decides and rolls to his feet with all the grace of an alleyway cat. "Alright. Off I go to poke my nose where it doesn't belong."

Rude hums and stands up, pushing his glasses higher up on his nose. "What's the operating procedure concerning information leakage? Sephiroth is a public figure."

"Standard OP. Suppress anything that might bring trouble to the company," Tseng says and leans back. "Nothing has changed, for now, so let's concentrate on getting Sephiroth quickly and smoothly back to Wutai." Where any incidents would be *much* easier to suppress.

"Here's hoping our famous Elite First won't make that impossible," Reno says. "Like, by very publicly going Tonberry on someone's ass."

Tseng sighs. "Reno…"

"I'm going, I'm going," Reno cackles. "Coming, Rude?"

"Mn," Rude hums and nods to Tseng. "Sir."

Tseng waits until they're out of the office before leaning back with a sigh.

The SOLDIER program has made one hell of a difference for Shinra, both in military power and in terms of publicity. Now if only the Science Department stopped treating them like disposable lab rats…

Running a hand down his face, Tseng shakes his head. Not his department. With that thought he turns to his computer and onto what is his department - and begins writing a report on what it would take to neutralise Sephiroth, if it ever became necessary.

Why hasn't he ever gone shopping with Sephiroth before? Aside from the fact that Sephiroth was socially repressed and awkward and aloof and would've never lowered himself as to be seen in public with anyone. And the fact that Genesis didn't want to even think about sharing his few precious moments of downtime with Sephiroth, of all people. And also the fact that Genesis was pretty sure, at least up until this point, that it would be an excruciating experience for everyone involved….

But it turns out that Sephiroth makes for a hilarious shopping company. The man is unexpectedly prissy and demanding - and, really, quite fussy when it comes to his looks.

While waiting for his coat to be readjusted, Sephiroth is putting on a fashion show in the tailor's very cushy dressing room.

"No, the hue is too cold - can you please get me the darker green one? Same size," Sephiroth says, making faces at his reflection, after trying out about a dozen different, almost identical, button up shirts.

"Right away, sir," the rather flustered tailor's assistant says and scurries off.

"I never thought you'd have a *favourite colour* ," Genesis scoffs, lounging back on a fancy armchair while watching as Sephiroth

accepts the shirt from the eager tailor's assistant. There's a pile of rejected and another of accepted articles of clothing nearby, and they're all in shades between dark forest green and the lightest shade of mint green.

No matter how much mess Sephiroth caused, the store would be making a big sale today - so much so that they'd closed early, just for Sephiroth.

But then again, there probably isn't a store in Midgar that wouldn't close for Sephiroth.

"You've never worn green before," Genesis adds, leaning back on the comfy armchair lazily and enjoying the VIP treatment - which includes coffee service and everything.

Tch. He was a VIP patron too - but they'd never closed the store for him.

"Hm," Sephiroth answers, deftly buttoning up the shirt and adjusting the cuffs, before pulling on the jacket of the suit he'd been trying on. Because that's what he's doing, trying to colour-match a suit. A very *light green* suit.

It doesn't suit him.

"A much better match, sir," the tailor's assistant says, a little too eagerly, all but fawning over him. "You have such a keen eye."

"Is that so," Sephiroth says noncommittally, making another hilarious stink face at himself while buttoning up the suit jacket. He still doesn't look satisfied.

"It washes you out," Genesis points out the obvious and swings to his feet. "My friend, you simply don't have the colouring for such pale hues."

Sephiroth sighs unhappily, giving his own reflection a disappointed look. It's almost a Goddess damned pout. "I don't, do I?" he says in defeat. "And the green really doesn't do my complexion any favours."

"It really doesn't," Genesis grins, clapping him on his shoulders. "I'm afraid black is still your colour."

Sephiroth sighs again and then looks at him thoughtfully. "What is that shirt you're wearing?"

"Alas, it's not high fashion. A Shinra issue," Genesis explains with a sigh. "Mass produced and utterly commonplace."

"Huh," Sephiroth looks surprised. "It… looks good?"

"Oh, spare me, I know it doesn't, but when you go through so many it's simply easier to get them in bulk," Genesis says, shaking his head. "Bullet holes simply do not come off, after all. And the SOLDIER uniform turtlenecks are just about the only good article of clothing Shinra has ever produced."

Sephiroth hums, looking him up and down and turning back to the mirror. Then he sighs. "Please get me another version of this suit," he says to the tailor's assistant. "In black this time."

"Right away, sir," the mostly useless assistant says, doing a remarkably good job at not bouncing in excitement. "And for a shirt, sir?"

Sephiroth looks at himself for a long moment. He scrunches up his nose and then mutters, "... I suppose it should be in red."

"Stealing my style, now?" Genesis asks, leaning against his shoulder. "Also what is wrong with red?"

"It's not just red, rather the combination of black and red… ah, never mind. I suppose it will bring out my eyes," Sephiroth says, like he's admitting defeat.

It will *bring out his eyes?* Who is this guy and what has he done to Sephiroth? Genesis snorts and claps him on the shoulder again. "If you say so."

He's right, though. Red and black look *much* better on Sephiroth. As does the suit. Genesis has never even imagined Sephiroth in formal wear before, but… it's not a bad look.

"You know, one fight in those delightful clothes, and they're in very expensive shreds," Genesis points out, while idly trying on some gloves, wondering if he should invest in some formal wear.

"Why would it be in shreds?" Sephiroth asks almost resentfully, turning to select a tie. He's actually a little mad about red and black suiting him so well!

Wow.

"You…" Genesis starts and then sighs. Of course Sephiroth doesn't remember. "Fancy and *very fitting,"* he adds, just to dig it in, "though they are, clothing of this calibre can't stand the types of battles you and I get in. That's why we wear *leather.* Or mass-produced uniforms we don't have to pay for."

Sephiroth just sort of blinks at him, easing the tie over his head. "You've worn a uniform?" he asks, dubious. "You?"

"Yes, I have worn a uniform - I had to go through the whole two ranks to get where I am now, didn't I?" Genesis asks, spreading out his fingers to test the new gloves. They're fingerless and quite nice. "Not a fan of trousers, I admit. I never had the ass for them."

Sephiroth coughs at that, smothering a laugh, and tucks the tie into his collar. "I see," he says, looking down at himself in order to adjust the tie.

Genesis leans back to watch him. "Neither do you. Or, rather, you have too much shoulder going on. Far too top-heavy, you'd look ridiculous."

"Thanks?" Sephiroth says, amused, and then turns around to face him, a black tie firmly in place. "How do I look?"

"Like a damn *Turk,"* Genesis scoffs. A very good looking Turk, but one nonetheless. He turns to the starry-eyed tailor's assistant. "Get him one of those great coats from the back - a black one, obviously, with red lining if you have it."

"Ah, those aren't leather, sir - mainly cotton and wool," the assistant says apologetically.

"Then get us a fancy wool one, and then go check how your master is coming along with our order."

"Y-yes, sir, right away, sir!"

"Please and thank you," Sephiroth says to the assistant, who almost trips hurrying off. "There's no need to be rude, Genesis."

"Who's rude? It's their job," Genesis huffs and folds his arms. "You rock up at Shinra tower looking like this, and they'll start making you go to *functions* too."

"What do you mean, functions?" Sephiroth asks warily.

"Parties, galas, meet and greets, maybe even *interviews,"* Genesis scoffs. He's usually the one who has to go - he was more presentable than Angeal, who didn't know how to swim those waters, or Sephiroth, who had the social graces of a poisonous wallflower. "Public events of the social kind."

"Ah," Sephiroth says, fiddling with his cuff. "That's fine then."

"... That's *fine?* You hate those things!"

"Do I?" Sephiroth asks, giving him a bitchy face like he knows something Genesis doesn't. "Hm."

Genesis eyes him dubiously. "Well, I suppose you'll learn why very soon," he mutters. "If they make you go."

The tailor's assistant brings in the great coat, and Genesis throws it over Sephiroth's broad shoulders before the man can try putting his arms into the sleeves. Hanging over him like a cape, it ties the outfit together perfectly.

"There, you look fit to take over the world," Genesis says, motioning to the mirror.

Sephiroth hums, stepping so that he faces the mirror at an angle. "I guess it's a popular colour scheme for a reason," he murmurs, begrudgingly impressed, and flicks the hem to make the red lining flash dramatically. "Fitting, I suppose."

"Silver Elite are going to lose their little minds," Genesis agrees. "You'll take it, then?"

Sephiroth takes a moment, adjusting his collar. "I'll take it," he says finally. Then he smiles and slightly *bows* at the tailor's assistant. "Thank you for your efforts."

"I-it wasn't any trouble, sir!" the poor assistant gulps, looking a little wobbly at the knees. "The master is finished with your leather coat, sir. If you're ready…"

"I am," Sephiroth agrees, running a satisfied hand down his front. "I am very ready."

The planet isn't, Genesis thinks with a sense of exhilarated *doom.* The planet isn't ready for this at all.

Finally, finally, *finally,* after the shopping has been done, his stupid signature leather jacket has been adjusted, and Genesis has given his final bitchy warning about not acting out of character, *finally*… Sephiroth can have some peace and quiet.

Some day off! Not that the sparring wasn't great, and the clothes were frankly desperately needed, even if he couldn't make his usual colours fit right. All that aside though, he really needs time to himself! There's still so much to figure out! And he *really* needs to meditate. He needs to sort himself out! And he also, probably, needs to make use of Shinra's archive and records and study some history.

He also really needs a proper mirror in his little single room apartment. The bathroom mirror isn't enough to appreciate the new clothes. To think he used to hate dressing up formally as Shen Yuan. The difference of a few years as Peak Lord makes! And admittedly, Shen Yuan could've never looked anywhere near as good as Sephiroth in a suit like this. Sephiroth, really, looks just too good. Fit for a thousand magazine covers. Which is fitting because he's pretty sure Sephiroth has been on magazine covers back on earth! Which is kinda weird from this perspective! *Famous in another world* sounds like a damn isekai light novel title.

Ah, but then his whole life is a mockery of the genre.

Dropping his shopping bags by the wardrobe and his new coats over its door, Sephiroth throws himself on his couch and sighs, running a hand through his long bangs.

He has clothing, his room still needs some improvements and will never be Qing Jing Peak, but it will do. Those were the easiest things to cover, really, and now that they're done, now that he's spent several hours getting used to this body and how it looks and who he's supposed to be… the world he's now part of…

Is he really just going to *be* Sephiroth from here on out? Is he supposed to forget PIDW and Binghe and Cang Qiong Mountain Sect? Just go on being Sephiroth and put Shen Qingqiu behind him?

… He really isn't sure he can, actually! In a way, Shen Qingqiu had suited him better than Shen Yuan had. Well, once the OOC restrictions had come off and he was free to be himself, anyway. Being a soldier, a super SOLDIER at that, with alien DNA and the lifeblood of the planet

in his guts…

Resting a hand on his stomach, Sephiroth tugs at the blood red shirt he has on.

It's… really a bit as if he's *Binghe* now. He's an alien hybrid thing here, so it's kind of like being a half-demon! Or, ah, weirdly accurate biblical angel? What with the angel wing motif these games have going for themselves… Sephiroth's final form was kinda eldritch, from what he recalls. Wings sticking out every which way. Ridiculous and over the top in a way only Final Fantasy can be!

Damn but he hopes he can grow wings at some point. That would be just so cool, he doesn't even care how ludicrous it would get. The whole thing about wings being cause for existential monster angst is a thing he probably would need to consider, but, seriously. *Wings!* Yes, please, thank you!

It's the lifeblood of the planet that bothers him the most. Not just because of the oil allegory.

It's also how the local reincarnation cycle works. Though it's more like a spiritual composting rather than straight up reincarnation - but still! The energy pumped into his veins comes from the *souls of dead things.*

Yeah, he can't ignore that anymore.

Sitting up, Sephiroth gets out of the dress pants he'd bought and the button up shirt, switching back to the more comfortable pyjama pants and t-shirt he started the day with. He takes a moment to put purchases away and tidy his room up to peak Feng Shui before sitting down on his bed.

The energy in his gut is thick, massive and near immovable. He'd read up on Mako as much as there was to be read on his phone. The cycle went something like Lifestream to Mako to Materia - so, in the right conditions, the stuff actually *crystallises.* So, in a way, Materia *is* spirit stones! And that's kinda what it feels like in his gut - like his energies are condensing, hardening under pressure… crystallising. Except not into a golden core, nah, just one big shapeless lump of dead-weight-energy.

Well, not on his watch!

Relaxing and breathing in and then slowly out, Sephiroth thinks about all the Cultivation tricks he learned cultivating with damaged spiritual

veins and incurable poison. Here he kind of has the opposite problem than with Shen Qingqiu, though - Sephiroth's spiritual veins aren't worn and fragile, they're hardened, like… *scar tissue.* He really feels a bit *burnt* on the inside!

Shinra's method was all quantity over quality where it comes to this stuff. Brute forcing their way into a semi-functional magic system, and who cares if it scorches the earth when there's instant profit to be made!

What a truly subtle metaphor.

Well… Shen Qingqiu has worked with worse - and at least there's a lot to work with! So as long as Sephiroth manages to avoid the Qi-deviation of the century, he will have one *hell* of a golden core! Just gotta *not burn himself inside out* ! No pressure!

Qi Condensation stage - done! He couldn't have done better himself. Foundation Establishment, however… yeah. Sephiroth really has a great body, but it is *not* prepared for a Golden Core Formation. His energy flow is all whack.

No wonder he cracked like an egg at the slightest bit of mental pressure… a bit like the original goods Shen Qingqiu, really, with his many Qi-deviations.

Right. Never mind that! He has a lot of work and not all the time in the world, alas. No seclusion training in this universe!

Time to get to it.

20

Somewhere, a flower dies.

It is a rare flower, a mysterious and exquisite herb rarely seen, with an ability unlike any other. When a seed of this plant is fed with the Qi of an individual, it becomes intrinsically linked with that individual - so much so, that as the seed is planted and takes root, it begins growing in the shape of that individual.

This particular plant was fed by Peak Lord of Qing Jing Peak of Cang Qiong Mountain Sect, immortal master Shen Qingqiu… sometime before his death.

It was planted by his sect sibling and fellow Peak Lord, that of An Ding, immortal master Shang Qinghua. And unbeknownst to Shen Qingqiu, Shang Qinghua paid very careful attention to the planting. His own flower would grow right next to the one fed with Shen Qingqiu's Qi, and if Shang Qinghua was anything, he was a survivor. And that's what these mystical plants were for - for survival.

For should they, for whatever reason, die, their souls, linked to their individual flowers, would find a new home in the plant grown in their shape.

In a hidden grove rarely visited, where the Sun and the Moon would have equal reign, where the dew gathered on new leaves and Qi flowed pure and wild, the seeds were planted with utmost care, to flourish in their impeccably selected and prepared environment.

And they did, for a while. Together they sprouted, and together they reached for light. For a while they flourished.

Nonetheless, one of them died. The first tender leaves dried up and curled in on themselves as the stalk withered, and what could have grown into a body underground never got a chance.

And the link to Shen Qingqiu's soul was severed.

Elsewhere, a body lay dead.

Perfectly preserved with a half-demon's Qi and effort, with that half-demon's blood parasites working within it, relentlessly repairing what death damages. No decay was allowed to take hold, even the

stiffening of death could not take root, the half-demon did not allow it. The body remained supple and soft, as though the person had only laid down to sleep.

Nonetheless, it was dead. It did not breathe nor did its heart beat. Every day and night half-demon begged the body, *awaken.* It did not.

Shen Qingqiu's soul was not there.

"What do you mean, *his soul isn't there?"* Luo Binghe, the new upcoming demon lord, asks dangerously the demon on her knees before him.

Madam Meiyin bows her head. She is a succubus and fortune-teller, one of the strongest in the human and the demon realm - and as such she knows the dangers of giving this man bad news. "I can only tell you what I sense, my lord - I know not what it means. Shen Qingqiu is not here - his future is not here, his fortunes have departed."

The demon lord before her oozes dark, rageful energy, grown only stronger by all-encompassing grief that besieged his every thought and wish. "I have done everything in my power to preserve his body, I have done everything to make sure he *will not reincarnate* - if his soul *isn't here,* then *where is it?!"*

Madam Meiyin presses her prettily painted lips together. "It has departed -"

"Don't you dare tell me he's gone!"

The succubus flinches and keeps her head bowed. "Gone doesn't mean his soul no longer exists," she says carefully. "Nor that he's necessarily beyond my lord's reach. He's only… gone. He is *somewhere else* now."

Luo Binghe lets out a wordless roar, turning away with a violent motion, as though he wants to tear at something to alleviate his fury. "So he slipped through my fingers? He reincarnated after all?!"

Madam Meiyin hesitates, not sure how much she can say. Should she offer too much and should later the young demon lord fail in his quest to get Shen Qingqiu back… he might look upon her past advice and see her as a liar, for giving him false hope. Her life would surely be forfeit then.

"My lord," she says, keeping her eyes on the floor. "I once, a year or so ago, met Shen Qingqiu, and I read his future for him. Though my

predictions can be vague, they are rarely wrong. He had a full life ahead of him, then, with a love of a younger lover and happiness unlike any he felt he deserved. And…"

She pauses as the demon lord before her keens in agony, clutching at his head, tearing at his hair. She swallows and waits, pretending she can't hear until he pants for a breath and is ready to listen once more.

"And," Madam Meiyin continues, very carefully, "I do not feel this fortune has at all changed."

21-23

For the first time in what feels like a lifetime, Sephiroth sends out a text message.

After an evening and night spent meditating, reading and cultivating, figuring out the ins and outs of his hardened meridian system and going through the files Genesis had had delivered to him, Sephiroth's come to the conclusion that meditation isn't enough. He needs to condition his body properly, and that means forms, that means movements - that means he *really* misses easy access to all the collected cultivation manuals of Qing Jing Peak's impressive libraries.

Ultimately what it really means is that he needs more space than his single room apartment has.

"If we're banned from the training room, where can I go train?"

"Goddess beyond, Sephiroth, it's supposed to be your day off," Genesis replies and then, soon after, "Just go to the training room. Who could stop you?"

He's really not sure about training in front of people. "Is that really the only option?"

"Well, you could do what you always do and just take a mission."

Mission, like the dozen or so on his phone involving Wutai? Which had a lot of *kill everyone* and *exterminate the opposition* and *leave no one alive* !?

Yeah, okay. Training room it is, then!

After carefully selecting an outfit that would look reasonably in character for the future Big Bad while also being a *bit* more comfortable than three different things of leather. And he still pulls on the, now slightly better fitting, leather coat with its huge shoulder guards, too! He should look… more or less in character.

People still stare as he makes his way through floor 49, other SOLDIERs in their much more comfortable looking uniforms and not so comfortable looking helmets. There's a handful of them hanging around, sitting by the window or chatting, SOLDIER Seconds and Thirds waiting for assignments. There are some people in lab coats

hanging around there too, just as a reminder of the true nature of the program.

Sephiroth had read about that too - everything Genesis had sent him about SOLDIER and the things he is supposed to already know.

SOLDIER, as much as they are the elite warriors of Shinra, their OP human weapons in the war to conquer the planet… are also lab rats. They'd all signed up on it in order to get those enhancements, and now Shinra's Science Department can do… just about whatever they want with them!

They're constantly being tested for performance and given experimental training, treatments and gear to test out. Almost all Materia and medicine Shinra produces goes through SOLDIER field testing before going into mass production. Because it's better that it's a SOLDIER dealing with the fallout if the Materia blows up in his face or the medicine makes him projectile vomit. They can handle it!

Ah, corporate dystopia with minimal human rights. Fun stuff.

Sephiroth walks past them all, barely acknowledging them, and aims for the training room. Which… really seems more like a testing ground, now that there's actual personnel there.

There's no one in the training room itself - but there are two technicians in the observatory adjacent.

"S-Sephiroth!" a lab technician stutters as he enters - the only way into the training room goes through the observatory, past all the monitoring equipment and computers. "What can we do for you?"

"I want to train," Sephiroth says in his best villain drawl, motioning to the training room with Masamune.

"Ah, that's - director Deusericus told us -"

Sephiroth narrows his eyes. "Oh, so I can't?"

The second lab tech elbows the first out of the way. "Of course you can, of course! *Professor Hojo* would be thrilled to have your training data," he assures, though the words are clearly aimed, very pointedly, at the other tech. "What kind of program settings would you like? We have a selection of new enemy AI and different environments - including numerous Wutai-inspired sequences!"

Sephiroth hesitates. That… could be interesting, actually. "Something from Wutai, with buildings - no enemies." That might give him a sense of what Wutai was like, culture-wise.

"... How are you going to train without enemies?"

Do SOLDIER not do forms? "Hmph," Sephiroth answers and turns to the training room, waving the electronic sliding door open. "Just start the simulation."

Seems like he got his villainous demanding attitude right, because they do. Seems like short and to the point is really the best way to hide a supposed amnesia!

Soon Sephiroth finds himself standing in a courtyard of what looks vaguely like some noble family's estate, feeling strangely like he's in a dream where everything is just a little bit off.

The simulation is… well, it kind of feels like a weird amusement park version of Asia, a mix of Japanese and Chinese aesthetics. The buildings have Japanese architecture for the most part, with bare unpainted wood and stone - but the roofs are all elaborate hip roofs. The written language, what little he can see of it, is in Mandarin, but the calligraphy style is very Japanese, very lyrical and artistic but without much form.

There's no bamboo in sight. Shame.

But at least the false environment makes it feel a little less like he's being watched - though he can still tell he is. Even with Sephiroth's burnt spiritual veins, he has pretty good senses.

Well, it's not like he hasn't trained with an audience before.

Unsheathing Masamune, Sephiroth holds the sheath in his off hand and takes a pose, breathing deeply in and concentrating. He still can't quite *circulate* his Qi, but he can sort it… flash it through himself in pulses, which lights up his meridian system and brings out the faults and snags therein.

Sephiroth is strong, hardy, seemingly endlessly durable. He's also fast, his overactive muscles easily going past the limitations of your usual normal human conditions. The issue is not quite his overall flexibility - but his… suppleness, maybe?

You need your veins to flex and contract for healthy circulation, and

that's the same with energy. Thanks to the Mako treatments and the emphasis on stamina and strength, Sephiroth's whole system is just… *hard.* Every part of him is hardened to endure who knows what, and it gives his meridian system very little *give.*

So that's what his form needs to focus on, increasing his meridian system's pliancy.

All the while wondering if all SOLDIERs were working with these kinds of toughened meridians, Sephiroth pulses his energy and begins to move. Qing Jing Peak sword forms work well enough for him, it turns out - as spiritual cultivators, they also have to maintain certain spiritual flexibility, after all. He needs to adjust the forms to the sword he has, but that's not too difficult. A lot of spiritual swordsmen use sword glares to extend the shape and size of their cutting edge, so the forms already have some wiggle room.

Soon Sephiroth has a set of moves that work the best, making his pulses of energy work better and better, until his whole meridian system buzzes, active and alive. He can even feel the beginnings of activity in his frankly *neglected* dantians, as energy wooshes through him in waves. It feels… pretty great.

What he doesn't know is that on the outside it looks rather like Sephiroth just activated a Limit Break - by will alone.

Professor Hojo is in the middle of an important experiment, when an overly excitable technician from the SOLDIER floors calls in to disturb him.

"Professor, I am very sorry for disturbing you, sir, but you need to see this!"

That is such an uninformative, *insipid* thing to say that Hojo mistakenly gives the man the benefit of the doubt and expects him to say *more,* to explain himself. When the man doesn't, he scoffs. "See what? Be more specific!"

"Yes, sir, sorry, sir - it's SOLDIER First Class, Sephiroth - he's in the training room."

Useless! "Sephiroth is often training, that is hardly anything to get excited over."

"Sir, by our estimation he's held a sustained Limit Break state for the past twenty-five minutes! And he isn't *fighting* !"

Hojo perks up at that. "Was he fighting when the Limit Break began?"

"No, sir, he's just, sort of… swinging his sword around? There's no enemy AI, he hasn't been in active combat at all!"

And yet he entered a Limit Break state? Sustaining it for *twenty five* minutes? Setting aside the utter incompetence of the tech for not calling him earlier, Hojo strokes his chin. Limit Break is caused by stress in life and death situations - a surge of strong emotions activates certain chemicals in the brain, which in turn push the body into a higher state of alertness and cause it to use all potential avenues for survival. It can increase a person's power output on all fronts, even doubling it - but only for a brief moment in time. Longer than that, and the muscle strain alone becomes detrimental.

It is a primitive instinct, a last ditch effort in the face of death, which Mako exposure has made slightly more commonplace in humans - and very commonplace in SOLDIERs. Mako acts as a natural stress trigger - and at the same time it acts as a well of power for SOLDIERs in Limit Break to use.

Much research had gone into intentional activation of the Limit Break state, with less than satisfactory results. If Sephiroth has figured out how to trigger the state outside combat…

"I'm on the way," Hojo says. "Do not tell him and *do not let him leave."*

"Yes, sir!" the overly excitable technician cries, and Hojo snaps his PHS shut.

As he strides to the elevator, Hojo considers the reports he had gotten, of Sephiroth's unusual activity in the last two days. Request for time off, unusual purchases, shopping trip with Hollander's failed project… coping mechanisms, he'd thought with disappointment. Sephiroth had dealt with the incident with a disheartening show of what could only be called *mental weakness,* striving for some semblance of control by spending money on frivolity.

But though an unusual reaction from Sephiroth, Hojo has seen worse, and so he'd been satisfied letting it slide, for now. If the usual behaviour continues it might require correcting, but only if it affects overall performance, and results are still pending. Further observation is needed.

The elevator carries him down to the SOLDIER floor, and he finds it unpleasantly busy. There is a crowd in front of the training room, SOLDIER Seconds and Thirds vying for a view inside. They're almost all babbling amongst themselves.

"He never trains here - I thought the virtual scenarios were kinda beneath him."

Yes, Hojo thinks with some satisfaction, they usually are. Though Hojo had been thinking about adding to the programming, to bring the virtual training chamber up to actually usable standards, for now it has very little to offer for someone like Sephiroth, a truly superior specimen.

"Do you think they're recording him? Do you think we'll get to see the recordings?!"

A very worthy thought, it's good to see there's some sense among the experimental subjects. There is much the lower ranks of SOLDIER could learn from Sephiroth.

"Did you see what he was *wearing?"*

Bah. "Will all of you move!" Professor Hojo says, irritated now, and watches with a displeased curl of his mouth as the SOLDIERs finally notice him. "You are in my way."

"Professor Hojo!"

"The Professor is here!"

"How scary -"

"Sorry, Professor -"

Hojo waits until they've cleared the way, wondering if he should take a firmer hand in the program. Clearly standards have been slipping since the time he was directing the program personally. Sadly, he doesn't have time to manage grunts these days, there's much more valuable work to be done, but perhaps a message to Deusericus would set things to rights.

Something to deal with later.

Hands clasped behind his back, Hojo enters the training room observatory. The technicians both quickly rush to greet him, and he

waves them off, walking up to the viewing window.

Sephiroth is performing Wutai sword forms, slowly moving between stances and attacks, with all the grace and precision Hojo has come to expect from him.

And he is, indeed, putting off enough energy for a Limit Break - even though the holographic setting, the glow around him is visible.

"What have you recorded?" Hojo asks, narrowing his eyes.

"Everything from the moment he entered, sir," the overeager technician tells him while the other one fumbles with a pad, handing over the latest printout. "His level is showing in the low fiftirs range!"

Low *fifties* ? "Then he's not at Limit Break," Hojo scowls, scanning through the readings.

"But, sir, the signature glow -"

"Sephiroth's resting level is forty eight," Hojo says impatiently. "His Limit Breaks regularly go to the upper seventies and beyond. Whatever this is, it's not a Limit Break."

But it is most definitely *something.* The energy output of Sephiroth's little session started uneven and then slowly levelled out as he continued. It had even decreased, which normally would be cause for concern, but seeing the steady, regular energy output now…

Hojo smiles, feeling the beginnings of a giggle in his gut.

Clearly, Sephiroth is figuring something out about himself and his enhancements. He has unlocked a new ability, a sixth sense, perhaps even a whole different way of controlling energy. Something he inherited from his Mother, but wasn't yet able to use.

There is only one explanation. The incident in the lab has pushed Sephiroth forward. The excess Mako or the moment he was technically dead - one or both together had broken through a human limitation.

The experiment has *evolved* .

Sephiroth has the loveliest flow going. The balance he is maintaining

is extremely delicate for all the energy he's working with, but his Qi is beginning to slowly circulate, he can feel it starting to pool in his lower dantian, there's even the beginnings of a proper spin going on. He's progressing at an incredible speed, really, it's unheard of! This body is really something else - he almost feels like he's getting close to a breakthrough already!

And then something interrupts him.

First comes the sense of danger, of the world around him around changing. The scenery stutters as the hologram breaks, reforming itself around him. Sephiroth, briefly, loses his footing, and the flow is distributed.

Then the hologram forms into the shape of a monster. An enormous cat with horns and blue and red fur, a Behemoth, roars into life and turns to him.

Sephiroth's heart skips a beat and the energy flow stutters, jitters - stalls.

"Now, Sephiroth," comes a voice through the speakers, an unnervingly thrilled sounding, almost giggling. "You have done well - now let's see you maintain that state against an opponent!"

Sephiroth's breath catches and he tastes blood.

The Qi-deviation crashes down on him like a twenty ton boulder, and his still unprepared system has no defence against it.

He *burns.*

Everything burns.

Cang Qiong Mountain Sect burned in the original text. Luo Binghe wrecked total devastation on the once greatest sect in the world, he killed everyone who fought, he hunted down everyone who fled, and those who knelt before him he *spared* - to become his servants, his slaves. A deserved retribution for all they'd done and all they failed to do.

Shen Yuan once saw a house fire down the street. An old couple had been cooking, something had gone wrong, the kitchen caught on fire. Before anyone could do anything the whole building was up in flames, and best the firefighters could hope for was to contain the flames. It was an old building, traditional and beautiful. Gone in an instant.

Half of Sephiroth's promotional art is him against a backdrop of flames, as he burns down the protagonist's home town.

He knows, on the inside, what's happening. He knows it intellectually. Though he'd not gone through many Qi deviations as Shen Qingqiu, he studied them, he'd witnessed them. It seemed like not a month went by without one disciple or another crashing down in a fit of Qi-deviation. Plus there was Liu Qingge and his deviation.

You can never really control how a Qi-deviation would go. It could be mental with uncontrollable emotions, it could be physical with sudden incredible changes, or it could be spiritual with any number of side effects. Or it could just be a week-long coma and a fever. Shen Qingqiu once saw a Qi-deviation that made one of his disciples as light as a feather - the mountain winds almost blew her off the peak! And another time, a disciple of his turned into a dog for a month. PIDW really just didn't do logic and reason when it comes to these things.

In Final Fantasy VII you just go mad, it turns out.

"Well done Sephiroth!" The Voice cries out triumphantly as the behemoth shatters into pixels. "Now, let's see you deal with -"

Sephiroth feels like a backseat driver in his own body, as it swings his sword, and in an instant all the speakers in the training room are reduced to scrap. He then follows with a sequence of swipes and swings that leaves the gun-metal grey walls all around him covered in slashes, sparks raining down on him as the hologram projectors join the speakers in their sorry fate.

Then he turned to the window, and the face plastered against it.

"Sephiroth, what are you doing - stop this instant -"

The glass shatters with an intensely gratifying crash, and The Voice squeaks in fright. Sephiroth smiles, and stalks forward.

"SOLDIER, get in here - stop him! Stop him!"

The Voice is scampering away now, running - while others rush into his place, to stand in front of Sephiroth.

All dressed identically, all smaller than him, all of them shaking. They hold their swords up to him, but they're shaking. They don't even dare to make a move against him. They're waiting for him to begin.

Sephiroth sees double for a moment, as sparks of green electricity become leaves and the pipes and cables hanging from the ceiling turn into bamboo stalks.

Ah, what cute and obedient disciples they are!

"Very well, this master shall start. Get ready," he murmurs, smiling, and makes the first move.

The disciple stumbles, barely in time with his guard and Sephiroth has to pull his attack back to keep the disciple's own sword from hurting them.

"Again - don't focus on the blade, read the body!" Sephiroth says. "Start with this master's hands, see how they move - follow them. Then follow the arms, read the movement of the shoulders. Don't worry! By the time the master is done, you will know where your opponent will strike from the placement of their feet alone."

He makes a few attacks against the disciple until he's satisfied with their defence, and then turns to another. They duck to avoid his blade.

"Good! But don't waste this momentum. When you parry, use the momentum of your body to lead you to another attack. Don't waste energy - in a fight, every move should count. Mind your form!"

Then another startled disciple, who takes his sword head on and is knocked off their feet. "Plant your feet, bend your knees. Stand firm," Sephiroth says, pulling them back to their feet. "Everything begins with your footing. Not like that - you're left-handed, so bring your other foot forward, that's it, now, again -"

He corrects their form until he's absolutely certain none of them have any idea what they're doing! His poor disciples, they can't even remember the basic stances.

"There's no use - everyone, form up into lines," Sephiroth orders, tutting slightly. "Quickly now - not like that, leave plenty of space in between, you don't want to accidentally swing at your neighbour once we start…"

The shocked and confused SOLDIERs form into lines in the destroyed training room as Sephiroth stands in front of them like an amused school teacher.

"Good. Now, follow this master's lead," Sephiroth says, smiling at them

fondly. "He will show you how it's done."

Behind him a destroyed camera crashes into the ground.

24-26

Chapter Notes

Warning for reference to medical torture in this one.

There are few things you learn very quickly after joining the SOLDIER program.

One, mind your own business. If it looks like it's above your paygrade, it is, and no amount of curiosity or bluster will be enough to fend off the Turks. Though, honestly, that's just common sense for any employee of Shinra Electric Power Company…

Two, mind your *own.* You see another SOLDIER struggling, you give them a hand, you put your shoulder out there for them to lean on, and you don't make note of it. They all come out of their first Mako injections, spewing their guts out. If someone acts a bit crazy, you give them a hand, you give them a moment, and you move on.

And three, there is no such thing as *too much training.* In all honesty, none of them get *enough* training, with the enhancements they get. They're always playing catch up with the Mako, trying to match skill and control to raw power - which only grows greater with each injection. They rarely even get the time to get adjusted to their latest batch of Mako. It was a waste of time!

Shinra didn't hire them to *train* them to be Elite SOLDIERs, no. That's what the injections were *for,* after all - they were an instant shortcut to a capability that normally took up to twenty years of hard training to achieve. SOLDIER were given raw power, relentless endurance and seemingly unstoppable speed at the point of a needle and then… then they were given work.

A lot of SOLDIER Third Classes delighted in that, taking full advantage of the powers given and going to town, not paying much mind to technical skill. What is skill when you can outrun, outlift and outlast every other human out there? Lot of Thirds let it get to their heads.

A lot of SOLDIER Thirds never made it to Seconds.

The ones that made it to Seconds knew better, usually. The only way to get there was to rise above Thirds, and the only way to do that is by training. Which they often had to beg, borrow, bribe and steal for.

Martial art manuals from Wutai, physical training from athletes, actual one on one sessions with older and more experienced warriors… even spars against each other, all worth their weight in materia in the SOLDIER program.

And training from a SOLDIER First Class…? Priceless.

Angeal Hewley was the best for it - he liked training with Seconds and sometimes even Thirds. He was a good teacher too, he took personal interest, he kept up with progress, he gave challenges. You could really feel yourself improving, under Angeal's hand.

Genesis Rhapsodos was… also good, if you needed tutoring in Materia. There was no better Spellcaster in Shinra then Genesis, and you could tell that he was always striving to get better. Unfortunately he gave up on his students if he felt they weren't putting in enough effort. Which was, sooner or later, all of them.

But *Sephiroth*…

"Good," the First says, still with that absolutely deranged smile on his face as he walks through their ranks, checking their stances. "Now again, from the beginning - one, two, three…" He actually claps a beat, and the SOLDIERs go through the poses in sequence, sifting in time with his claps.

Kunsel's knees are shaking, and he can feel strain in muscles he used to be absolutely sure he'd trained enough. His grip on his sword is white-knuckled, and he can feel the way the tip is quivering radiating down the blade, into his hands, his wrists, his arms. He barely dares to breathe.

At Sephiroth's call, he shifts with everyone else to the next pose - feet shifting and then back firmly in the ground.

No one dares to breathe too loudly, and no one has said a word - no one wants to break whatever has come over Sephiroth.

In his mind, Kunsel is desperately trying to memorise everything so that the moment it ends he could write it all down.

"Knee," Sephiroth says to someone, and there's a shift of a boot as someone shifts their position. "Good. Lower your left elbow. Very good. You there, relax your grip, *breathe."*

Kunsel's heart skips a beat as Sephiroth speaks to him, as the First

approaches him. "No need to have such a death grip. It's better to lose your sword than your fingers," the First says, smiling, smiling, green eyes glowing.

Kunsel almost drops the whole sword as Sephiroth touches his hand to urge him to relax. His breath escapes in a wooshy exhale and Sephiroth, SOLDIER First Class, chuckles at him.

"There, that's much better, isn't it?" And before Kunsel can do more than gape at him, the First is moving forward. "Good! Now, is everyone ready?" Sephiroth asks, sauntering up to stand in front of them.

"Yes, sir!" comes the instant answer from about a dozen SOLDIERs.

"So obedient," Sephiroth purrs. "Good. Now swing!"

Dozen sword beams launch in unison at the First, who watches them come with a smug little smile, before swiping them away with a single easy swing of his sword.

"There, everyone got it, very good," Sephiroth says, watching them like he wants to eat them all. "You have done this master very proud. That ends today's lesson - I want all of you to practise these moves, but without activating your Qi. Do not tempt Qi-deviation."

Like with most things Sephiroth has said during the lesson, none of them have any idea what he's saying, but they agree nonetheless. "Yes, sir!"

"Good. Go on then," Sephiroth says with a little wave and still with that *smile.* "Shoo!"

Sephiroth just *shoo'd* them.

On still shaking knees, Kunsel stumbles with the rest of the Thirds and Seconds out of the destroyed training room. They're all just about equally shell-shocked as they quietly meet with the SOLDIERs who hadn't been able to fit in the lesson, but who had all been watching, avidly, as it progressed.

There's a sense of shock and awe in the air - like they'd all just gone through a bombing run together, and it has been equal parts amazing and *horrifying.*

"None of this gets off this floor," a voice says quietly from the back.

One of the older Seconds, whose name Kunsel doesn't know. "Got it? Anyone asks, you say nothing about this. As far as anyone outside this floor is concerned, *nothing happened."*

"Sephiroth, is he…?"

"He calmed down after Professor Hojo and the technicians left," the older SOLDIER whispers very firmly. "And that. Is. All."

Kunsel swallows and looks back through the malfunctioning, still open automatic doors.

Sephiroth has taken seat on the floor in the middle of the devastation with Masamune held upon his crossed legs. He's meditating.

"I think I'd die for him," someone breathes out fervently.

Kunsel clears his throat before he can do something silly like agree. "Should we, um… call Director Deusericus, give the all clear? There's bound to be, um… cleanup, and such."

The other SOLDIERs consider this, looking conflicted.

"I say give it a moment," someone sighs, shakily sitting down on the floor. Whether intentionally or not, he's mirroring Sephiroth's pose. "I, for one, need a moment."

He is not the only one, and they're all trying to look into the training room, to catch a glimpse of the SOLDIER First Class.

After a moment just standing there without a thought in his head, Kunsel joins them. "So, um. Does anyone know anything about mediation?"

They don't, but that doesn't stop them from trying.

"... Welp. Now, I don't like saying I told you so - but I *totally* told you so," Reno points out, pointing at the screen - frozen on the very final frame just before Sephiroth destroyed the cameras. "I absolutely told Tseng this would happen."

"No one was injured," Rude points out, shifting through papers.

"That we know of! SOLDIER closed ranks *real quick,"* Reno hums,

shuffling through security feeds. They captured the flight of the technicians and the Department Head of Shinra Science from the scene of the *ongoing incident* , but after that, it's hard to say. There's a bunch of SOLDIERs literally in the way, blocking the view to the virtual training room with their bodies. They'd allowed no one but other SOLDIERs into the floor since.

Sephiroth is still there, as are the SOLDIERs, and unbeknownst to everyone else in the building, they have a damn *situation* on their hands. A potential *rebellion* situation.

"So," Reno says, rocking back and forth in his chair. "Sephiroth gets over-overdosed, flatlines, is brought back, loses his memory. Shinra Medical lets him go because that's what they do. He acts funny. Actually takes time off. Makes buncha random purchases. *Puts on a shirt.* Seems, for about a day, like a normal human being. He even gets takeout!"

"Mn," Rude agrees.

"The Crimson Commander takes him out, they do some shopping, probably have a heart to heart, make it into a few gossip columns," Reno continues, picking up the latest copy of Midgar Mail - Sephiroth sitting shotgun in Genesis' convertible and looking irritated had made the front page. "... Who are now absolutely convinced that our two Elites are romantically involved."

"A natural conclusion," Rude comments without looking at him.

"And so sad for poor Hewley, who's been in love with Rhapsodos since they were kids, according to this," Reno hums, giving the magazine a little flip. "The lives of SOLDIER First Classes are truly full of struggle."

"Mn."

Reno throws the magazine on the desk. "So, Sephiroth has a nice day, feels all normal, and the next morning he decides to go do some training, as SOLDIERs do," he continues, rewinding the video back. "He does some funky magic sword stuff for a bit, and then, boom, Professor Hojo launches a Behemoth at his ass. And Sephiroth proceeds to absolutely lose his shit."

Rude looks up. "I'd call that reasonable cause," he comments. "For a panic attack, if nothing else."

"Yeah, especially if the poor schmuck can't even remember what a

Behemoth is," Reno scoffs and leans back, crossing his hands behind his head as he peers up at the ceiling vents. "So now we have a *totally sane* Department Head who was almost killed by his own son, two traumatised lab techs, a whole lot of SOLDIERs on high alert, an entire floor that's barricaded itself… and no eyes on Sephiroth and no idea what his status is."

"That about sums it up," Rude agrees and turns a page.

Reno glances at him, frowning. "You are not even listening, are you? What are you reading?"

"List of all the non-classified medical procedures Sephiroth has gone through," Rude answers. "The annotations by Professor Hojo are… interesting."

Reno blinks and then grabs the file from his hands. He takes a moment to skim through it before landing on what Rude has been reading. *"Subject shows improved humour, will continue to administer preventive care* - that doesn't seem too weird?"

"The two previous reports," Rude explains and Reno leafs back. "Reading between the lines, Sephiroth objected to an operation, and was assigned another immediately after," Rude adds. "I'm no physician, but I didn't see anaesthetic in the medicine list."

Reno frowns, reading the files more closely. "Exploratory surgery? Wait, wait, wait. What? Sephiroth showed a bit of an attitude and as punishment Hojo did *open surgery* on him without anaesthesia?"

"That's my reading of it also."

"Holy shit, that guy's life *sucks,"* Reno says and then takes another look. "The poor fuck was *seventeen?"*

"There was a similar operation when he was nineteen," Rude adds. "For similar reasons."

"So it's a fucking pattern," Reno mutters. "Damn. No wonder they wrestled the SOLDIER program out of Hojo's total control as soon as they could."

Rude hums in agreement. "I thought it might shed light on what Professor Hojo's reaction to this might be."

Reno's face falls. "Fuck," he says emphatically.

Now, he doesn't have much sympathy for SOLDIER, they willingly signed up to all the bullshit they went through - plus, when SOLDIER went off the beaten path it was Turks who had to clean their crap up. Sephiroth is a bit different, the poor asshole was born into the life, but that doesn't mean he has anything to do with Turks. At least not unless he *made* himself their business - and usually he didn't. And that was good! Live and let the freaks live, Reno was more than happy with that.

But this… yeah.

The idea of Sephiroth who had *already lost it once* being subjected to his crazy father's idea of discipline - probably while on company property, full of all these squishy and vulnerable company people! - did not appeal to him. Tseng was right - life at Shinra would be so much easier if the Science Department stopped treating the SOLDIER like their personal playthings and seen them for what they are.

Really fucking dangerous human weapons. With all the bullshit that came with it.

Rude looks at him levelly and then takes off his sunglasses in order to clean them - sure sign of how stressed he is. "How do you want to play this?"

"Preferably from *another continent?"* Reno asks a bit incredulously and then thinks about it. "Yeah, actually, that sounds about right! You have Deusericus' location?"

Rude checks his PHS. "Logs put him in his office," he says.

"Great, good, wonderful," Reno bounces to his feet, taking out his own PHS, hitting the speed dial. "Let's go. Hey, Tseng!"

"Reno," comes very tiredly through the hand held. "Please tell me you have eyes on Sephiroth."

"I have his rough location - still on floor 49, with just about every SOLDIER sitting between him and the elevator. No idea what's going on in there, but he's not moved from the training room yet. What about Hewley and Rhapsodos, what's their status?"

"Out on missions - Deusericus has recalled both of them."

"Excellent," Reno says, hurrying for the elevators. "What say we punt this whole mess speedily to Wutai before the good Professor decides to

poke at the already sparkling *bomb* in our midst?"

Tseng sighs. "What?"

Reno explains their conclusions about what they should expect from Hojo. "And if today is any indication as to how the *current* Sephiroth reacts to Hojo's style of child rearing and discipline… well, I wouldn't like to see the Science Department afterwards! Or the building." Or the entirety of Midgar, for that matter.

He's seen Sephiroth's stats - there's not much they could throw in the guy's way to stop him.

"I see," Tseng says over the line, and it sounds like he's pinching the bridge of his nose. "Yes, I think it might be best if Sephiroth vacated the premises as soon as possible."

"My thinking exactly, boss."

"Very well. I'll arrange a transport," Tseng says. "You'll deal with getting him there?"

Cheers, boss, well done throwing him under the bus! But as it happens, yes. "Heading off to pay Director Deusericus a visit now," Reno says while Rude punches in the floor number. "Here's hoping the SOLDIERs are willing and able to wrangle Sephiroth into a plane."

"Here's hoping," Tseng agrees and then, damningly, adds, "Call me once you get to Wutai," and *hangs up*.

Aw, shit.

Reno looks at Rude. "Ever been to Wutai?"

"... No?"

"It's wet, miserable, and full of bugs."

Rude sighs. "I'll pack accordingly."

Angeal makes it to Midgar first, having rushed through his mission and finished it early. Genesis, even if he rushed, would have had a harder time making it back - Junon wasn't exactly close, after all, even by helicopter it would take a few hours. Genesis still makes his

presence known, muttering in his ear the whole way.

"I was asleep when he messaged me! And why is it my job to babysit the favoured son of the Science Department anyway?! *What madness must our quest bring to find you so lost -"*

"Genesis…" Angeal sighs, pinning his PHS between his right shoulder and his ear while attempting to park his truck in the Shinra Building's maze of a parking garage.

"How was I supposed to know he would lose it the moment I turned my back to him? Our fair hero seemed so well put together yesterday - the clothes he picked! He looked very smart! I was almost proud! I thought he had it handled."

"Genesis, I doubt anyone blames you for this," Angeal assures him, checking the mirrors.

"And they better not! Yesterday he seemed fine. Said he was looking for *a quiet day in,"* Genesis scoffs. "Of course for Sephiroth that must involve untold physical toil. When he messaged me, I thought he would do what he always does, fight a few monsters, slay a few enemies. Normal behaviour, to be expected from our great hero!"

Angeal finishes parking and takes the PHS in his hand. "I thought Sephiroth was fine too," he says, placating. "He was confused, sure, but overall he was calm and collected. None of us could've seen this coming."

Genesis lets out an explosive sigh. "Maybe we should have. He's not himself."

"There are many ways to *not be yourself* ," Angeal says with a sigh. "Try as we might, we are not trained for these kinds of mental issues."

"No. And neither is anyone else at Shinra for that matter."

Angeal hums in agreement and then looks up as he spots movement outside his truck. Well, damn. "Listen, Genesis, I have to go. I'll do my best to handle this. What's your ETA?"

"Another six hours, minimum," Genesis says regretfully. "You're going to take Sephiroth on alone?"

"Hopefully not," Angeal says. "But probably. I'll… try to keep you posted."

"I'll write you a lovely eulogy," Genesis offers, and with a snort Angeal hangs up on him.

He takes a moment to inhale and brace himself. Then he turns the engine off and pockets his keys. The Turk outside waits politely - though not very patiently - for him to step out.

"Mr. Hewley, I'm here to escort you directly to Director Deusericus' office."

"I should head to the SOLDIER floor first," Angeal says slowly, warily - not liking the implications of this at all.

The bald Turk is utterly impassive behind his sunglasses. "Director Deusericus is waiting. This way."

So… the situation has already escalated to that point, has it. Damn.

Angeal grabs the Buster Sword and then follows the Turk to the elevators, and spends the entire time going up mentally running through all the ways this could go wrong. There's *a lot of* ways this could go wrong - but surely the company wouldn't actually try to *eliminate* Sephiroth?

Lazard's appearance doesn't give him much hope - the man's face is tight with tension, and there's a Turk lounging by the window, a casual threat.

"Angeal," Lazard says and looks up. He doesn't look at all relieved to see him - just more tense. "Good. There's no time for pleasantries or even explanations, so I'm just going to get to it."

"Sir," Angeal says guardedly.

"Sephiroth is on floor 49," Lazard begins while the Turks watch them with deceptive disinterest. "As far as we can tell, he's not actively hostile, but he hasn't moved in several hours. There are approximately twenty SOLDIER members on the floor with him, and they've stationed themselves between Sephiroth and the elevator. For security reasons, they're refusing entry for anyone but active SOLDIER members. Even I wasn't allowed off the elevator."

Angeal frowns. So either Sephiroth was too dangerous to let anyone in - or he was so vulnerable that SOLDIER members had stepped up to guard him. "I assume you're sending me in, with orders?"

"Yes. Sephiroth has a mission, and you're going to deliver him to it," Lazard says and picks up his PHS. "I'll send details to your account. Your first and only priority is getting Sephiroth out of the building and into the airport. There's a transport waiting for him on standby."

Angeal takes out his PHS and checks the newest mission.

They're sending Sephiroth to Wutai? *Now?* "Sir, I understand *some* disciplinary action is in order, but is this really the time for -"

"The less time we waste, the better for all of us," Lazard cuts him off and glances at the redheaded Turk by the window.

The Turk shrugs. "Sephiroth almost killed Department Head Hojo," he says lazily. "We at Shinra Public Security Department feel it's best to put some distance between the two."

Angeal blinks, surprised. "Sephiroth almost killed Hojo?" he asks faintly. "Was anyone else -?"

"No one was killed - there weren't even any injuries," Lazard assures him.

"You'll be briefed fully on the incident," the red head Turk promises, "once both you and Sephiroth are safely on board a transport and in the air."

Angeal tries to read between the lines, even as his gut says that sending a SOLDIER in what sounds like still ongoing mental breakdown to an active war zone is a *bad idea* . But then, he's not sure what's the alternative? He'd been half expecting to be tasked with Sephiroth's imprisonment! Or worse, his detainment in the labs!

If Sephiroth really attacked Hojo… Wutai might be his best chance at some freedom.

The red head Turk clears his throat. "Clock's ticking, SOLDIER First Class Angeal Hewley," he says. "Better get moving."

"There's a helicopter available on the HQ Landing Pad," the other Turk adds. "Or alternatively, a car in front of the building. Both your and Sephiroth's belongings have already been packed and delivered to the transport."

"All we are missing is the big guy himself," the red head says. "Think you can go get him for us?"

Angeal looks at them and then at Lazard, who's watching him seriously. The man looks weary and stressed - but not like his hand is being forced. There's not time for much else, he can only hope his read on the situation is right.

"Alright." Angeal nods. "I'll get Sephiroth on the transport."

"Good! We'll meet you there," the redhead says, clapping his hands together. "Don't be late! And Hewley… don't let *anything* stop you."

Angeal arches his brows in alarm as the two Turks saunter out. "What the hell does that mean?"

Lazard sighs. "Angeal," he says. "There's no time. Get Sephiroth out of here. *Now."*

27-29

Chapter Notes

Warning for vomiting.

Sephiroth can't stand up. It's kind of embarrassing. Actually, forget that - it's really embarrassing! Even when sitting down he feels all wobbly and unsteady!

After the hyperfocus mode passed, it all just sorta crashed down on him.

He's barely managed to wrangle his fluctuating Qi back under control, but the wild surges, stops and starts and the awful flare-ups before have left him feeling like jello in human form. He's gone through what feels like an earthquake, a volcanic eruption, but from the inside - and then he strained to keep at all in! Twisted himself into a pretzel in order to teach, spraining his *everything* in the progress! Now his veins are freshly scorched, his flesh feels tenderised, and he can *feel his bones.* It is incredibly unsettling to be so aware of your bones!

For such a minor Qi-deviation it's really too much. Who told Sephiroth to have this much Qi - and also this many muscles! He's strained all of them!

And now he can't stand up. Well, not without swaying and stumbling and probably falling over himself like an idiot, anyway. Which makes it the same thing. His cute disciples - that is, the other SOLDIER members are still watching him. After what he put them through in his delirium, he can't show such an embarrassing face as to get up only to fall flat on his face!

He can hear them now, murmuring quietly amongst themselves in the hall outside.

"... Like, breathing, I think? And I think you're not supposed to think about anything…"

"How can you not think about anything?"

"... Been quiet for a while. No word from the director either…"

"... Think there's still chocolate bars left in the vending machine?"

Ooh, *chocolate*. Sephiroth could kill for a chocolate bar right now. He really should've thought about that before! Semi-modern world with inexplicably a lot of the same stuff as Earth has - he really should've realised that might include modern style sweets! And, damn, he's missed chocolate so much, back in PIDW. He should get chocolate, as a treat. He deserves it!

But he can't get up. Plus, he destroyed the place! How can he show his face outside after he destroyed the whole room? It's not like he can explain himself - this world doesn't even know what Qi-deviation is! On the outside it seemed just like he went crazy! Which might be in character for Sephiroth, but - still!

So here he is, a third hour in running, cultivating and meditating with no better way to solve this issue. Soon, something would happen to force his hand, or this would go on forever, and eventually he'd die. There's no other recourse.

At least he'd mostly managed to repair the damage done to his meridians. His poor dantians, flooded with chaotic Qi just when he got them to open up, took a hit - but hey, at least there's no golden core there to damage!

Yeah, that just… makes him sadder, really.

Sephiroth draws a slow breath and teases another snag in his system to loosen up - smoothing another scarred vein until it relaxes. He should go back to physical cultivation, it worked so beautifully for Sephiroth's system - but alas… he can't stand up.

Ah, he's really doomed.

"Heads up - elevator."

"Oh, shit, it's Hewley."

"Here we go…"

Sephiroth peeks one eye open, but the SOLDIERs by the door have gone quiet, and the ones further down the hall are too far away for him to hear - especially since it sounds like they're whispering out there. Probably explaining the situation to Angeal.

Ahhh! It's a pity he didn't bust a wall open in his deviated craze - he could've used it to escape! He might be about fifty floors above the ground level, but Sephiroth is supposed to know how to fly, right?! He

could make it! He might even grow some wings along the way! It's been known to happen! Somewhere!

Angeal appears by the doorway, taking a moment to soak in all the destruction, and Sephiroth does his best not to look like he wants to curl up and die in shame. That resolution gets harder as Angeal walks over to crouch down in front of him.

Oh no, his face. *I'm not angry, just disappointed* much?!

"Sephiroth," Angeal says gently. "Are you alright?"

Oh, come on, Angeal-bro! The disciples other SOLDIERs are right there! What is he supposed to say, huh?

Sephiroth exhales slowly and tries to think what Sephiroth should say in this situation. He destroyed the training room, busted up all the cameras and everything. Destruction of company property! There's probably going to be consequences for that, huh?

"What's the…?" Sephiroth starts and then winces at his voice. His throat is so dry it stings. Ouch.

Angeal relaxes a little. "They want you outta here, asap. There's a transport waiting. I'm supposed to deliver you to it."

… huh? That's, um. He has no idea! Is he being kicked out? He's Sephiroth - isn't he, like, the poster boy for Shinra's military might and stuff?

Angeal, clearly seeing his confusion, elaborates. "You're reassigned to Wutai, effective immediately."

… Oh. *Great.* "And if I don't feel like going anywhere?"

Angeal sighs. "I don't know. Nothing good. It's not like I can really force you to do anything, Sephiroth, but I'd prefer it if you came willingly."

Hah, jokes on your, bro, Sephiroth can't actually do shit right now!

… But he can't really stay here. And hell, being sent to a war front at least saves him from having to face any of this just yet! Maybe never. It's a corporate dystopia, and he's the poster boy - maybe Shinra will do him a favour and sweep this all under the rug! They did with Nibelheim.

And Wutai is the closest thing to home…

"... Alright," Sephiroth says. "But you're probably going to have to drag me."

"What? No, Sephiroth, you can just walk, it's alright -"

"Angeal, I -" just had a Qi-deviation and my system feels all outta whack, but that's not a thing and he's Sephiroth - can't admit weakness! "Just - give me a hand."

Angeal blinks and then goes, "Oh!" as Sephiroth visibly wavers, trying to get up. "Oh, a delayed reaction? Right, here -"

Sephiroth really has to be dragged up, like some drunk guy. And even then his knees almost give up! So embarrassing! His cute disciples the other SOLDIERs are watching!

Oh, urg, the *nausea*…

"If I throw up on you, it's nothing personal," Sephiroth groans, closing his eyes, both to fight back the vertigo and so that he doesn't have to see the other SOLDIERs reaction. No one is laughing at him, at least.

And then Angeal laughs at him. Rude! The man sounds relieved, though, as he grabs him firmly by the elbow, propping him up. "I promise I won't hold it against you."

Sephiroth sighs, humiliated. "Thanks," he mutters and then, plaintively asks, "Do they have chocolate in Wutai?"

"Chocolate?"

"I could really go for a chocolate bar right now."

"Oh, I bet," Angeal says, sounding a little amused now. "I don't know about Wutai, but I'm sure we can get you some chocolate somewhere," he promises. "Are you ready to go?"

No. "Yeah, let's go."

Sephiroth can barely keep to his feet as Angeal walks him to the elevator. Angeal has never seen him like this, and it worries him. It doesn't seem normal, even in terms of usual SOLDIER side effects. He

itches to ask what did Hojo do to the man… but this is not the time.

He'd never been so aware of the fact that Sephiroth is younger than him and Genesis. He never looks or acts like it, if anything, he acts older than he is. Usually.

The SOLDIER milling about in the hallway part for them, but not happily - and Angeal is also aware what it must look like from their perspective. In order to hide the fact that Sephiroth can't keep his balance, Angeal has to keep a pretty firm grip on his right arm - and he's carrying Masamune for Sephiroth too. It must look like he has his fellow First somehow detained.

"At ease," Angeal tells them, and it puts precisely none of them at ease.

"Um, sir," one of them says. "Where are you, uh… assigned? Next?" He's looking at Sephiroth.

If Angeal didn't already suspect that Sephiroth attacked none of them, this would've put an end to that fear. Though Sephiroth is considered an intimidating figure, none of these men look at all scared of him. If anything, they look scared *for* him.

Sephiroth clears his throat, his arm in Angeal's grip tensing. "I'm headed to Wutai," he says then. "Apparently."

A reaction runs through the SOLDIERs, and some of them exchange pointed looks. Some look worried, hesitant - others look determined.

"Good luck, sir," one of them says bravely.

"We'll meet you there," another says, more bold than brave.

Sephiroth looks at the speaker and then lets out a quiet, "Hmph," and reaches out to pat the man's hair with his free hand. "I'll be waiting."

Angeal arches his brows, and SOLDIER Third Class being *petted* gapes in shock. Sephiroth chuckles and gives the man's hair a little ruffle before his hand falls.

Sephiroth… must still be out of it. They better take the short way to the airport.

"Come on," Angeal says, clearing his throat loudly. "We're going to be late."

Sephiroth hums, and with the SOLDIERs around them throwing little

farewells and good luck wishes, Angeal drags his fellow First to the elevator, hitting up. They'd have to get through the office floors on foot, but thankfully the stairwell is relatively private. Much less so than the lobby. Hopefully they wouldn't see anyone.

"Sephiroth," Angeal says, adjusting his hold on Sephiroth's right elbow while the man sways against him. "What happened?"

"Mn," Sephiroth hums, hanging his head. "Before or after I destroyed the training room?"

"Ah, before?"

Sephiroth is quiet for a moment. "I trained. I - tried to - hmm," he stops, looking unhappy. "I was trying to work through something. And I was interrupted. It… threw me off."

Angeal arches a brow. "Badly enough that you tried to kill Professor Hojo?"

Sephiroth blinks and lifts his head. It looks like it takes effort. "I tried to kill Hojo?"

"That's what they told me."

"Oh. That was him? I don't - I wasn't thinking clearly," Sephiroth mutters and runs his free hand down his face. "What a way to empathise with Liu-shidi."

That's not a familiar name. "Who?"

"... No one," Sephiroth sighs and lets his head hang again. "Ah, I feel like *shit."*

Angeal hums sympathetically. "You look like it too. When was the last time you drank something?"

"Depends on what time it is?" Sephiroth groans and Angeal tells him. "Ah. Then it was five hours ago."

And Sephiroth had been exercising, then had a breakdown and has been doing who knows what. "We'll get you an energy drink before we set off," Angeal promises and gives him a *look*. "You know, you don't usually train in the virtual training room. Not unless Genesis drags you, and even then it had better be late."

Sephiroth snorts. "I wonder why," he mutters and then lets out a little

urp noise and clasps his left hand over his mouth. He looks very pale, and there are beads of sweat on his temple.

"Hang on, we're almost there," Angeal says urgently and looks up at the floor numbers scrolling by. "Just a few more -"

Just as he says it, the elevator comes to a halt - on floor 66. The upper science floor.

Angeal feels a terrible sense of foreboding as the door opens - and Professor Hojo stands beyond it, flanked by two infantry troopers and shadowed by four laboratory technicians.

"Ah, Sephiroth," the Professor says, hand on the elevator button, sounding somewhere between smug and pissed off. "There you are."

"Professor," Angeal says, wary, wondering if this is what the Turk meant. "Apologies - we're on our way to assignment -"

"You have arrived, congratulations," Hojo says impatiently. "Come right this way - laboratory one."

"I'm afraid we have orders, Professor, it's important -"

"There is nothing more important than science!" Hojo says sharply. "Now *come along.* There are tests we need to run, and the more time we waste the more invaluable data we lose!"

Angeal hesitates. Hojo is a department head. Lazard is just a Director of a sub-department - Hojo's orders trump his. And - and is Angeal really supposed to fight other company employees? That's - that's *treason.* Shinra has its issues, of course, but…

Hojo doesn't wait for him to make his decision - the Professor steps up and grabs Sephiroth's wrist. "Come along, *boy,* it's time for -"

It's like the world slows down.

Angeal has a grip on Sephiroth's right elbow, holding him up. Hojo has his left wrist and is pulling. Normally it wouldn't be strong enough to even bother Sephiroth. Normally a man of Hojo's slim build wouldn't be an issue. But these aren't normal conditions.

Another tug, and Sephiroth might fall, stumble, anything. Another tug, and they'll find out how weak Sephiroth currently is. Another tug, and Angeal would have to make a choice between following orders… or

getting his friend out of there.

Hojo pulls violently, Angeal braces himself - and then Sephiroth throws up on Hojo.

He throws up a lot.

He throws up mostly *blood.*

The aftermath is unspeakably gruesome.

"Oh, that is *so much* better," Sephiroth sighs, easily tugging his wrist from Hojo's loose grip and wiping the back of it against his lips. "Pardon me, Professor. Bad blood, you know, had to come out sooner or later."

Hojo just stands there, stunned, covered in blood. Angeal looks between them in horrified amazement as Sephiroth stands up under his own power again. The infantry troopers have actually backed away a step in apparent horror. The technicians look like they want to run away.

There's an audible dripping sound.

Sephiroth clears his throat, looks away, and then reaches to press up on the elevator key pad.

The elevator doors close on Hojo's blood-soaked visage with a sad little squeak.

Rude releases an exhale when he sees the door leading to the helipad opening and Hewley and Sephiroth finally exiting. He's not terribly thrilled about having to chauffeur a man so fresh out of metal breakdown - especially with the way Reno is cackling in his earpiece - but at least the man is officially out the building.

Now he just has to get him *off it,* and they'd be good, the building would be secure.

"Oh man, I am so glad *that* got caught on video," Reno giggles in his ear. "Nothing against the Professor personally, but hoolyy shit, it was downright poetic."

Rude sighs, watching as Hewley and Sephiroth stop to talk by the door

- too far to be heard over the helicopter rotors and too obscured by their positions for accurate lip reading. "Perhaps we should be more concerned with Sephiroth's health."

"The man's walking and talking and brushed off Hewley's offer for a Curaga," Reno says. "If he wants to be bleeding internally, that's his problem - all we need to do is get him out of Midgar."

"And then keep a watch over him in Wutai."

"Yes, and that, but nowhere does it say we need to nurse him into health too," Reno says. "Just get him and Hewley in the air and out of here before Hojo realises he's leaving."

"Hn," Rude answers, not looking away from Hewley and Sephiroth and not relaxing until they finally approach the helicopter and Hewley stoves away their blades.

Rude has seen Sephiroth personally a number of times - they often serve together as bodyguards for the President, Rude sent in by the Turks and Sephiroth called upon by the President, because the SOLDIER looks good in papers. So most of the times Rude has seen him had been him being annoyed, resigned, and bored.

The Sephiroth that awkwardly enters the helicopter looks a little queasy and embarrassed - but also excited.

Hewley hands Sephiroth a headset and pulls another one on himself. "Are you sure you're feeling alright?" He says over the headset.

"I'm fine, Angeal - I promise I don't have internal bleeding," Sephiroth answers, indulgent and looks around. "... There isn't a seatbelt in here, is there?"

"What's a seatbelt? No, never mind," Hewley sighs, sounding a little exasperated. "Sephiroth, you *threw up blood!* That's not normal."

"Maybe I just bit my tongue and swallowed some blood before, it's fine -"

"Some blood - it was a *lot* of blood!"

"Barely even a litre -"

"A litre! Of blood! You would've had to have bitten your tongue clean off to swallow that much!"

Sephiroth sighs. "Angeal, I swear I didn't bite my tongue off -"

Well, he sounds fine, Rude decides, and after making sure the helicopter is secure and there's no one else on the pad, he takes off. "Phase two complete," he reports to Reno. "The big guy is off the building."

"Sweet," Reno says. "I'm off then - meet you at the airport."

"Roger that," Rude agrees, bringing the helicopter above the Shinra Building and then turning it towards the airport. Below them the city whirls around, its lights leaving streaks in Rude's vision.

The bickering in the backseat takes a pause as Sephiroth peers outside in apparent amazement. Then Hewley continues to poke and prod at the man, and Rude pretends to tune them out - all the while listening to every word. Mostly it's Sephiroth trying to convince Hewley that he isn't in some kind of acute organ failure or about to hack out a lung. Hewley isn't very convinced.

"You're very nonchalant about this," Hewley says dubiously.

"Trust me, it was bad blood, it's better out than in," Sephiroth answers, craning his neck to look down through the window. "Oh wow…"

"Bad blood. That's what you said to Hojo," Hewley points out. "Like it actually means something. What do you mean by *bad blood?"*

Sephiroth doesn't answer, pretending to be utterly preoccupied by the view.

Hewley sighs. "Sephiroth, please. I'm really concerned - if there's something wrong, you should tell us -"

That makes the other SOLDIER react. "Oh, please, spare me the power of friendship speech -"

"I absolutely will *not,"* Hewley snorts. "If it's the only thing that gets you to talk about this, I'll even throw in *sincere emotions."*

Though jokingly said, it seems to be an effective threat, judging by Sephiroth's disgusted expression. "You're an evil man, Angeal."

"Yes, how dare I be worried about my friend, how utterly unforgivable. Now please tell me why you throwing up blood isn't a health concern."

Sephiroth sighs. "I… it's hard to explain."

"Because you don't know."

"No. Because the terminology doesn't exist," Sephiroth mutters and then sighs, looking outside again. "Before I was interrupted, I was attempting to, uh, *align* my internal energies properly, and repair some of the damage done to my system previously. It's a delicate process and can go horribly wrong if interrupted, which is exactly what happened. As a result of the interruption, my internal system went wildly out of alignment, which caused some issues. I fixed those after, as much as I could, and what I threw up was essentially… waste produced by the progress."

Rude wishes, not for the first time, that there was a way to record stuff said on board a helicopter. Thankfully, judging by Hewley's expression in the mirror, the man doesn't understand what Sephiroth is saying any better than he does.

"Internal energies - you mean your MP?"

"MP," Sephiroth repeats and hums thoughtfully. "That's part of it, I guess."

Hewley shakes his head. "So your… MP is out of alignment?"

He sounds confused, and Rude can't blame the man. He didn't know MP could even *have* an alignment.

Sephiroth is quiet for a moment, looking away. "Tell me, Angeal. What is MP? Where does it come from, where in your body does it reside - how is it produced?"

"Uh. It's just an intrinsic quality people have? Which increases the more you use it - and with Mako exposure? I don't know, I guess I never thought about it," Angeal admits. "You'd have better luck asking Genesis."

"Hmm. Is he coming to Wutai?"

Hewley shakes his head. "I don't know, but there's no shortage of missions to be completed there. Still, Sephiroth. That was a lot of blood."

"I'm not throwing up blood now, am I?" Sephiroth says. "I'm fine, Angeal, I promise. Hopefully that was the worst of it."

Hewley doesn't look particularly reassured. "Hopefully?! Wait, you don't mean to say you're going to continue with this… alignment stuff?"

Sephiroth hums noncommittally and looks outside the window again. They're getting to the airport now.

Rude blows out a breath. "It's time to land," he informs his passengers and hopes Reno wouldn't take too long to catch up with them. Maybe he would have some idea what the hell Sephiroth is on about. If not, then he'd at least pretend he did.

Rude is with Hewley on this one, though. Sephiroth intending to continue with his *alignment* practice with the risk for further… *misalignments*… It didn't sound good.

Interesting though that Professor Hojo clearly had no idea what his son was doing either. Whatever it is, it isn't anything Shinra Science had figured out. Hmm.

Something to add to Sephiroth's file, Rude muses, and brings them to the ground.

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"... And so, to minimise the chances of further incidents, Sephiroth was immediately assigned a priority mission in the Wutai region," Tseng concludes his report, his eyes fixed squarely by the President's nameplate on the desk. "A decision approved and backed by Director Deusericus, seeing as Sephiroth had fourteen missions pending in the area."

President Shinra hums, noncommittal. "And now I have an irate Head of Science Department to handle."

"I thought it would be better than the alternative," Tseng says simply.

"Hmph," the president answers. "What is Sephiroth's status now?"

"He's on board the troop transport SXR-774 and will be landing directly in Wutai in approximately twelve hours," Tseng reports. "Mentally and physically it's hard to tell - the last thing he did when still in this building was throw up a considerable amount of blood -"

"Hah!" The President snorts. "Yes, I saw the video."

Damnit, Reno. "Yes, sir. In any case, my people on board the transport report that he seems to be feeling better now."

"I see," the President scoffs and looks away, drumming his fingers against his enormous desk and turning away. "And what about his supposed newfound abilities? Hojo mentioned something about a new level of energy control - is Sephiroth finally starting to justify all the money that went into his creation?"

"... Sir?"

President Shinra slaps his desk. "Is he finally living up to his damned heritage? Is this him *finally* exhibiting Ancient abilities?"

Tseng hesitates. Ah. That. "Though it's… difficult to say for sure, it does seem that Sephiroth has developed some kind of new ability," he admits. "My agent with him heard him call what he was doing *energy alignment,* and said that Sephiroth also questioned the source of MP and where it resides in the body. So, one might reasonably theorise that Sephiroth is becoming more… aware."

The President stands up. "More aware," he repeats and turns to the

windows that cover the walls of his penthouse office with their complete view of the city. "More… *aware.* Energy alignment. Professor Gast told me that the Ancients could feel the Mako flowing in the Planet. Could it be something like that?"

Tseng hesitates. "I… couldn't say, sir. It's possible."

President Shinra hums. "Good, good. And you sent him to *Wutai* too. Excellent," he decides. "That's better than Hojo locking him up in the labs! Better let the boy test his new abilities in the field. And your people will keep an eye on him?"

"Around the clock, sir," Tseng promises.

"Good! That's good," the President nods, clasping his hands behind his back and looking over Midgar with satisfaction. "Two decades of waiting. It's been expensive, but finally we will have some return for our investment. And who knows… maybe in Wutai he will find us the Promised Land, and we can put an end to all the… waste here."

Tseng presses his lips together and says nothing to that.

The President nods to himself. "Good. Keep me posted on Sephiroth's progress. The moment anything comes up, I want to know about it."

"Yes, sir, of course," Tseng bows his head. "What about Professor Hojo?"

"I'll handle him," President Shinra mutters. "Hojo has gotten a little annoying. It's unfortunate. All his best contributions are decades behind him - he lost his vision a long time ago, but… he still has his uses."

Mostly as a deterrent, yes. Tseng thinks. "Very good sir. If that will be all…?"

"Yes, yes, go - oh, and get me the full file on Sephiroth," President Shinra says and nods to himself. "I should refresh my memory."

"I will have it delivered to your desk within half an hour."

Tseng heads down from the President's office, taking a moment to arrange the file delivery. Cissnei could handle it, she has the evening shift. Checking his watch, he then considers his options, and the likely trouble waiting for him should Professor Hojo find out that Turks were involved in ferrying Sephiroth out of Midgar.

Reno and Rude are in the air, and there wouldn't be any updates either way until tomorrow. And Tseng has finished his paperwork for the day…

Loosening his tie, Tseng rolls his shoulders and mentally punches out for the day. He's out of the building and on a train before anyone can stop him - and soon after that, he's on his way down to Sector Five slums. The way down there is as familiar to him as the way to Shinra Building… though it's been a while.

He doesn't quite relax until he enters the sphere of Aerith's influence, and sees the first specks of green in the ground. Finding her isn't difficult - all you need is to follow the flowers.

They're always facing her, wherever she is.

Right now at the Leaf House school, dressed in a pale blue dress with her long hair done up, helping the school staff arrange some sort of evening party. They're stringing fairy lights all around the schoolyard, and Aerith is setting up flower arrangements. It takes Tseng no time at all to figure out it's for someone's wedding party.

He hides in an alleyway and watches as Aerith spreads flowers, joy and *life* all around her, effortless and natural as breathing. She's sixteen now, and really coming into her power, that *mysterious* power no one truly understands, but everyone wants a piece of.

Power, which Sephiroth was supposed to have.

Tseng has read his file - all of them, even the one Hojo buried and pretended didn't exist, the one written by his predecessor, Shinra Electric Power Company's original Head of Science - Aerith's father.

How alike they two are. Aerith, the daughter of Professor Gast Faremis and Ifalna, and Sephiroth, the son of Professor Hojo and…

Sephiroth was an accidental success born out of a failure. The experiments that went into his creation made the SOLDIER program possible - but that's not what he was originally intended for. He was supposed to be the first step in the return of the Ancients… but he never showed the *right signs*.

Instead what he had was raw, unmitigated power. And Shinra Electric Power Company liked power. And so the SOLDIER program took off.

If Sephiroth now starts showing powers like those of the Ancients…

What would it even look like? Comparing Sephiroth to Aerith's is really like comparing a sword to a flower. They aren't even in the same realm as each other. Tseng really can't imagine it. The idea of him with the power of the Ancients…

Sephiroth is what Shinra made him, ultimately. He has never made anything grow.

In the schoolyard Aerith laughs at something another girl says before making a mock offended face and throwing a flowerbud at her. They end up chasing each other around a table before heading inside the school, arm in arm, two girls with far too much hope for the world in their hearts.

Sighing, Tseng adds an annotation to Aerith's watch logs about her being in good health and safe, and turns to leave.

He has no hope for Sephiroth, but if his existence keeps Aerith, who's growing up so fast, off the company's radar a little longer… he can't help but be grateful.

They've landed in Wutai after a frankly miserable plane ride in a windowless, *seat-less* troop carrier - which, why even call it a *troop carrier* when it's clearly not designed to be carrying people? The thing is filled with boxes and stuff, there was barely enough room to move!

Guess that's what happens with last minute takeoffs - you get what you get.

The first few minutes onboard were fine and kinda novel - being on a plane at all was kind of a mind trip, because, heh, plane, Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky, eat your heart out! But then it became just hours upon hours of boredom in a rattling tube of metal. Sword flying is clearly a superior mode of transport.

"We will have your things delivered to wherever you're going to be staying," Reno says, waving them off the plane, attention fixed on one of the bigger boxes. "Rude, come give me a hand with this…"

"We should -" Rude starts to say, looking at the SOLDIERs.

"Yeah, yeah, now come give me a hand with this."

Angeal gives them an awkward, slightly relieved smile and then claps Sephiroth on the shoulder. "We better get out of the way," he says, and together they exit the plane.

Sephiroth had been bracing himself for a *warfront,* Angeal had even told him what to expect, but he… didn't actually know what that entailed.

Shinra troops had taken over a small town at the foot of Tamblin Mountain sometime in the past and are now using it as their forward base. That's where they land - in a dirt runway cut into the forest, just by the town. And it's…

It reminds him of old movies, the mixture of vaguely mixed Asian style buildings, with these modern canvas tents pitched in between them and on the roads. There are trucks that *totally aren't jeeps* that have worn grooves into soft streets, unprepared for such traffic, making everything messy and muddy. They've erected fences all over the place, sectioning parts off, and there are floodlights everywhere. There's also *robots* patrolling the place.

In the distance, on the rolling hills somewhere to the west, there are *rice paddies* and behind them mountains. All around them there's a lush wall of *green* that looks almost like a rainforest. It actually might be rainforest! It would fit the allegory!

The mental, *ethnic* vertigo is so strong for a moment that Sephiroth doesn't know which way to turn to look. He doesn't know what to think. Mostly he just feels kinda… unnerved.

Angeal returns to his side before he even realises he'd gone somewhere. "I talked to the Colonel. Come on," Angeal says, clapping him on the shoulder. "They've set up a place for us. We'll… debrief there."

"... Hn," Sephiroth answers, and follows him.

There's a lot of Shinra troops milling about, infantry mostly, but some SOLDIER Seconds and Thirds too. They all stop to stare. Some of them look excited, but most just look tired and dirty and worn.

Sephiroth wonders if the Colonel is in charge of them. Actually, it might be that *they're* now in charge of everyone here! They're SOLDIERs First Class. Isn't that the highest rank? He can't remember if Sephiroth being a General was fanon or canon, but hasn't he been involved with the war since the beginning?

Would he have to give orders now, orders to march, to fight… to kill?

Angeal shows him to a house that was clearly someone's home before Shinra took the place over. It's a single room with tatami floors and rice paper walls, and the military bunks clash with the aesthetic horribly. Their pillows are clearly seat cushions.

There's a fancy looking kimono stand that's being used to hang bags and ammo satchels.

"What happened to the people who lived here?" Sephiroth can't help but ask, staring at the stand and wondering where the kimono had gone.

"They abandoned the town ahead of the troops," Angeal says.

Sephiroth looks at him and then at the room. Did they really, or is that a nicer thought than *they were all executed?* "... Right," he says and picks up the seat cushions from the bunk, piling them up in the corner - wondering if there was a table here, and what happened to it.

"Are you alright?" Angeal asks.

Probably not! "What's our mission here?" Sephiroth asks, picking up bags and satchels from the stand and carrying them outside.

"... We have a day to acclimate. After that, there's a number of things that need to be accomplished," Angeal says, subdued, and takes out his phone. "We can start slow - there's no major engagements being planned just now, no one will mind."

"Mn, and what does *starting slow* mean?" Sephiroth asks, as he picks up stuff around the hut and gets rid of it.

"Well, there's a number of monster extermination requests around here - Wutai wildlife is high-level, and it's rumoured that they're being intentionally bred by Wutai people. They've been attacking patrols."

Sephiroth gets rid of most of the random crap in the hut and then considers the bunk beds. They're ugly and probably unpleasant, but… they have to sleep somewhere.

It takes just one swing of Masamune to improve the situation immensely.

"Um," Angeal says as Sephiroth finishes separating the beds and moves

one of them to the other side of the hut. "... Why?"

"I am not sleeping in a *bunk bed,"* Sephiroth says simply and looks around. "... Do you think they have folding screens around here?"

Angeal arches his brows. "I don't know for sure. I suppose we could ask around? I think there's a storage house where they've put the collected, um," he clears his throat. "Things that will be sent to Midgar eventually. Maybe we can requisition some of it."

Things to be sent to Midgar … that's nice. That's a nice way to say *the spoils of war,* huh.

Sephiroth looks away. It's the way of war, he knows that, nothing unusual about it. It happened in PIDW too - cut out all the smut and stupidity, and all Binghe did was plunder and loot and pillage. When he wasn't being handed tributes, anyway. It's just par for the course! Right? Right…

"You…" Angeal starts and then sighs and puts the phone away. "How about I'll go get a screen for you, if there's any available. Do you want anything else?" He sounds very indulgent and understanding.

"Two screens. And a table," Sephiroth says without facing him, feeling like a sullen little kid being placated. "... Thank you. Can you ask someone to get rid of the - stuff outside?"

"I'll take care of it," Angeal promises. "You just… take a moment to make yourself comfortable, okay? There's no rush."

Aka, *pull yourself together, man, you're looking really pitiful right now.* Thanks, Angeal-bro.

Sephiroth's waits until Angeal is gone before sinking down to sit on one of the beds, putting his head in his hands.

Though they'd not seen much from the plane, what with it not having windows and all, he can see it in his mind's eye now. Burned villages smoking in the jungle, scorched fields, muddy paddies ruined. He'd never cared much for any kind of war stuff, but he'd seen his share of first person shooters and letsplays.

It all feels very real all of a sudden.

And he's supposed to be the Big Bad here! The Demon of Wutai! Who knows how many people he's already killed in this war! And sure, it is

a war, and that's what happens, and *yeah,* he has killed before as Shen Qingqiu, but -!

Going to war on behalf of the *America-allegory* of the situation? The invader, the hostile occupier, the - the evil planet-sucking dystopian megacorporation?!

Dragging his hands down his face, Sephiroth sighs and looks up.

There are calligraphy scrolls hung up on each side of the door. One reads *Integrity* and the other *Honour* . Sephiroth stares at them miserably for a long moment.

Yeah.

He's so going to end up defecting here, isn't he? Four days, *four days* in this world, and he's doing to fuck up the whole plot, right here and now. It must be some kind of record! But where the fuck will be even defect to? The Demon of Wutai, hello?! The locals probably want his head on a spike!

"I am so fucked," he mutters wretchedly and hangs his head.

The first few hours in the forward camp go by quickly, for Angeal. Mostly in putting down brushfires and smoothing down ruffled feathers.

"That was Sephiroth, right - Sephiroth is in our camp!"

"Where is he then? I want to meet him!"

"Think he would shake my hand?"

"Does anyone have a camera - I want to send a picture to my Ma!"

Most of the troopers are excited - and they have every reason to be. More SOLDIER means less dangerous work for them while the SOLDIER members take care of the more dangerous missions.

But you can't please everyone.

"Well?" the infantry Colonel in charge of the town demands when Angeal presents himself to the man. "Isn't he even going to come to introduce himself?"

"I'm very sorry, sir," Angeal says awkwardly, with the Turks' warnings still in his ear. *No one is to know that Sephiroth isn't at hundred percent right now.* And Angeal agreed. "It was a very busy time in Midgar just before we left, and the plane wasn't exactly comfortable - he's resting before we start tackling missions tomorrow."

"Couldn't he sleep on the plane? Isn't he supposed to be a veteran - doesn't he know you're supposed to catch all the sleep you can get, when you can get it?" The Colonel huffs, offended and superior. He's an older man, in his fifties, and though Angeal doesn't know him, he recognizes the type.

A lot of older military types didn't really… believe that SOLDIERs were worth the hype.

"What if we were in an emergency situation here and the camp was under attack?" The Colonel asks. "Would he have sauntered off then, just willy-nilly?"

"I'm sure in that case Sephiroth would've fought, but as that wasn't the case," Angeal says slowly, "I'm sorry sir, in favour of the missions ahead, he's getting all the rest he can, now."

It takes more than that to placate the camp commander, and Sephiroth would need to present himself first thing in the morning, but at least Angeal manages to keep people from trying to bother Sephiroth. Who… really didn't look too good, before.

Angeal had got him two folding screens and a table from the loot storage - he'd even found a nice tea set, and some tea in a tin - and if he didn't know better, he would've said Sephiroth almost… cried.

He's never seen the man look so *lost.*

Which sends him here, to the mess hall set up by the infantry in one of the larger buildings of the town. It's impossible to miss, and he had to wonder how the pompous Colonel didn't claim the building for the command - it's easily the grandest in the village, with spacious interiors and the inner courtyard with a mossy garden.

All the plastic folding tables probably would have made Sephiroth sick, though.

Angeal approaches the field kitchen with his proverbial hat in hand, asking, "Hey, do you have any chocolate here?"

"We do - for a price," the cook says, apologetically. "Sorry, sir, it's protocol - the company provides you grub and meds, but all luxury goods are Gil only."

And the prices are, of course, through the roof.

"... And if it's for Sephiroth?" Angeal asks hopefully, because the poor kid in him can't stomach paying fifty Gil for a candy bar.

The cook hesitates and then narrows his eyes. "... Sephiroth eats chocolate?"

"It's his favourite," Angeal lies shamelessly.

There's a moment of painful hesitation between protocol and idol worship. "... Fine, but just this once, okay?" the cook mutters and quickly shoves two bars towards him. "I can get away marking these out as damaged in transit, but after that they'll start taking it out of my pay! And don't go spreading this around either, sir, or else everyone will be begging for charity!"

"I won't tell a soul," Angeal promises and adds two chocolate bars to his tray. "Thank you so much."

He fills the tray with enough food for him and Sephiroth and offers an apologetic smile to the group of SOLDIER Seconds before heading out.

He doesn't quite make it to his and Sephiroth's quarters.

"So, the big guy is not doing so hot, after all."

It's Reno, accosting him along the way, lounging back against a bit of painted wall. He's not quite hidden - except that coming from the direction he did, Angeal couldn't see him.

"Mood seems to go up and down; he's practically swinging from side to side, that man," Reno continues, watching the street idly. "You got it handled?"

Angeal stops and takes a steadying breath, staring down the street. It's getting late and dark, and the green-tinted electrical lights by the Shinra troops clash with the red paint of the buildings. "Sephiroth is meditating."

"Yeah, because that's totally something he does," the Turk snorts, folding his arms. "I've read his file, man. A homebody he is *not.* If this

was your usual mission, he'd already be out there, fighting."

Angeal hesitates, looking down at the tray. "He's going to be fine," he says. "Now excuse me, the food will get cold -"

"Hey, man, I'm on your side here," the Turk says. "I'm just asking. We just want the best for him!"

Sure. "The Turks are very invested in this," Angeal comments, pointedly and gives the redhead a look. They are - hell, they'd sent not just one, but two Turks to the front lines! That's more than investment.

The camp had been excited to see Sephiroth and Angeal there - they'd been less excited to find out that they came with Turk company. Turks don't generally take part in anything to do with Wutai, the war front isn't exactly their area of expertise, and that's how the military likes it. Though they're technically all part of the same department, there's no love lost there. The Turks very much aren't welcome.

That's probably why Reno is here - in the shadows, out of view. The Turks hadn't been seen much since their landing, really. And probably for a good reason.

"We're invested in damage control," Reno says, peering up at the sky lazily, leaning against the wall with all the grace of a cat. "Whatever's going on with Sephiroth isn't normal, and it's in the company's best interest that it doesn't come to head in Midgar."

"Right. Far better if he loses his cool here," Angeal mutters, watching as a curious firefly investigates a flood light. "Less collateral damage."

"That's it," Reno agrees lazily. "Personally, I'd prefer that whatever is going on with him is resolved quickly, so that we can all go home. But we will be here as long as it takes. As long as he needs."

Great, that's just wonderful. But… that also means that they're not in a hurry. Even the dozen or so missions pressing in on them aren't that high priority. They don't have the forces or the resources to make another try at Fort Tamblin, and most of the fighting out there has been fought into a standstill.

The war is essentially in a stalemate until further notice. The point of Sephiroth being here - before his incident, anyway - is more about morale than anything else. It always looks good when they send in the big guns, after all.

"As long as he needs," Angeal repeats. "Really?"

"The President approved it and everything," Reno agrees and looks at him. "Whatever Sephiroth needs."

Well. He knows that's probably bullshit, but in case it isn't…
"Sephiroth needs time," Angeal says after a while, following the firefly with his eyes as it flies away. "And I think more than anything he needs *privacy."*

Reno narrows his eyes. Then his expression clears. "Alright. Time we have, privacy we can arrange," he says flippantly. "Never much cared for military camps anyway. Right then. Good night, Hewley."

Angeal watches him go suspiciously, but it appears that was that. "Right," he mutters and hopes it wouldn't come back to bite them in the ass later.

Shaking his head, he returns to the house, to find that Sephiroth had finished rearranging the furniture to his liking - he's also made tea, and is holding a steaming cup in his hand as he stares into nothing.

His hands, Angeal notes with relief, are no longer shaking.

"Here, food," he calls. "Also found you something special."

Sephiroth blinks and looks up as Angeal puts the tray down, handing him both of the chocolate bars. "Oh," he says. He looks guilty. "Angeal, I…"

"Special gift from the commissary, free of charge - next one we will have to pay for, and they charge through the nose here," Angeal says cheerfully and sits across from him, divvying up the plates and utensils. "So you better enjoy it."

"... I will. Thank you," Sephiroth murmurs, closing his long fingers delicately over the treat.

"Good. Now come on, let's eat," Angeal says, pushing the plates closer to him. "We have a lot of work tomorrow. Better stock up."

"... Monster hunting, right?"

"Yes," Angeal agrees. "Just you and me and a bunch of wild beasts. It should be great."

Sephiroth looks at him for a long moment and then, finally, nods

slowly. "Alright."

They eat, and the tightly wound coil of anxiety in Angeal's gut unwinds, if only a little.

33-35

Reno hates the fact that in the last twenty four hours he's somehow become the Turk Expert on SOLDIER behaviour. Well, Rude did some of the research too, but still, this is not the way Reno expected to see his career going.

"I think the fundamental problem with the entire SOLDIER corps is that they don't know how to take a fucking break," he decides, rocking his chair back and forth on its back legs while making faces at the ceiling. "I mean, just look at the shitshow that started just because Sephiroth took some time off! They couldn't even let him have that."

Rude hums, shuffling through what looks like all of the camp's paperwork.

Reno continues, crossing his hands behind his neck. "Rhapsodos and Hewley don't leave him alone, *everything* he does is scrutinised -"

"Mostly by us," Rude comments.

Reno ignores him. "The other Firsts take him out training, because they don't do *enough of that* in their work hours, clearly, and then Rhapsodos drags him out shopping, and that's just the first day. The second day he goes to train in what was at the time an empty training room *not in use,* and the moment he does, people call Hojo on his ass," he waves a hand. "The poor schmuck took a break, and all he got was so much stress for it! And that's without even taking into consideration his memory loss!"

Rude hums in agreement and then looks up. "SOLDIERs don't have work hours."

"What?" Reno asks, his momentum halted.

"SOLDIERs aren't paid by the hour - they're paid by the mission. They, technically, pick their own hours. They can and do regularly make thousands of Gil in a matter of hours."

The front legs of Reno's chair bang against the floor, rattling their entire paper hut of a house. "Well, I know that, yes, everyone knows that. It's a big selling point, aside from the whole *become a hero by having Mako pumped into your veins* thing."

Rude hums in agreement. "With his mission completion rate, Sephiroth regularly makes up to quarter million Gil in a month."

"... By working *how many hours,* in general, per day?"

"Seventeen -

"Seventeen?! When does the fucker sleep?!"

Rude shrugs and puts the papers down. "According to his medical file, he generally can do with five hours of sleep while maintaining optimal function."

"And who the fuck determined that - Professor Hojo?" Reno scoffs. "Un-fucking-believable. Also my point is made! SOLDIERs don't know how to take a fucking break."

"Truly a detrimental view on work," Rude agrees.

"It really fucking is! I mean, come on! You take a bunch of jacked up meatheads, give them a system that *massively* rewards their overwork, you keep them on call *all the time,* keeping them on edge and hyped up, all the while Hojo looms over them like the fucking boogeyman and can pull them into the labs any time he wants!" Reno scoffs. "Never mind the fact that they're considered, technically, Shinra property, with all the Mako in their veins, so they have fuck all employee's rights."

"Might add to the reason why so few take time off," Rude agrees.

"They *do* have paid time off, right?" Reno asks. "The program isn't that much of a shit, right?"

"They do, standard rate… which is on average about a fifth of what they'd stand to make working. Or in Sephiroth's case… one-thirtieth."

"Of course it fucking is," Reno scoffs with disgust.

"... And the Science department can still call them in, if they're in Midgar."

"So either work yourself to early death or take a massive hit to the wallet and *still* Science can just grab your ass if they feel like it! What the fuck," Reno mutters. "Who the fuck designed the SOLDIER program, anyway?"

"According to the paperwork, originally Professor Gast… but its

current form is mostly Professor Hojo's handiwork."

"Guess I should've expected that," Reno mutters and rocks back in his chair again, glaring at the ceiling. "The whole fucking system is rigged to blow. Nice fucking experiment you got there, Professor."

And now it's his problem to deal with. Wonderful.

He thinks of the way Angeal said it, time and privacy, like it was a joke, an impossible task. It makes him so fucking mad.

The only fucking reason work as a Turk is worth it sometimes is because it comes with some sweet fucking benefits - including *properly paid* time off and all the incentive on the fucking planet to use it, too. Because way back when Turks were first put together, then still called the *Investigation Sector of the General Affairs Department,* someone had the common sense to look at these guys, with abilities and access of fucking spies, and go, "yeah, you know what we don't want to see - what happens when these assholes get burnout." Because that's how you end up with your asshole bosses assassinated in the night.

To this day Turks will fight tooth and nail to keep their off work hours *off the fucking clock* . Because what happens on the clock is bad enough, and if it doesn't justify being able to fucking punch out at the end of the day, then what's even the fucking point?

Time and privacy aren't impossible to get, for the Turks - those are fucking contractually enforced benefits they're entitled to, and just a few of many! They keep them fucking sane! And woe be the fucking asshole who tries to mess with them. Even Heidegger knows better.

It's so damn wild to realise that just a few floors down there a bunch of bastards who just don't… care? Who are incentivised not to care. Who'd rather work themselves to death rather than risk being seen at loose ends. Guess that's how Shinra keeps the SOLDIERs in check - they're clearly all of them too overworked to even think straight anymore. And those who are not working still might be pulled into the Science Department any time. Shit.

Dragging his hands down his face with a groan, Reno rolls out of his chair. "I hate this fucking assignment already. Did you find anything?"

"There are a few potential sites," Rude agrees and shows him a drawn map of the area. "A charcoal burner's house over here has been abandoned for months, and might be in bad condition. A hunter's lodge over here, it's higher up on the mountains and might be within

view of Wutai patrols from Fort Tamblin. And here there's an old farm, partially burned in a bombing two years back, abandoned since."

Reno considers the locations. The hunter's lodge is right out… "We'll start with the charcoal place," he decides. "If that doesn't work out, then the farm."

"Sounds good," Rude agreed. "How will we justify it?"

"Do we justify it? It's Turk business," Reno scoffs, taking out his PHS. "And so, it's no one's business."

Rude thinks about that for a moment and then nods. "I'll requisition supplies."

"You do that," Reno agrees, checks his watch to make sure it's office hours back home and makes a call. It takes no time for the call to connect. "Good morning, boss, how's the weather in Midgar?"

"There was a storm, but it looks like the worst is over now," Tseng answers. "What's the word for Sephiroth?"

Reno flashes back to the moment he heard the arguably strongest man in the world sobbing into his hands about how fucked he is. "Yeah, so, about that. We're making some new arrangements."

Sephiroth feels a little better after an evening of meditation and a full night of sleep. Things look a little better in the light of day, and though the question of what the fuck he'd going to do about the *war* is still there, it has been put off. In favour of monster hunting!

"You seem… excited?" Angeal comments as they prepare to go.

He is! "Mn," Sephiroth answers, and carefully doesn't bounce with eagerness.

Even if the monsters of Final Fantasy can't hold a candle to the convoluted, messy and lazily put together nature of the monsters in PIDW, they're still interesting! Especially since he isn't sure what they actually are and how they work. Advent Children and Crisis Core really make it so unclear, because, like, everything turned into energy sparkles when it died? And he thinks in the movie one of the

Sephiroth copies - weird to think about them now - summoned some monsters with magic? And then there was Zack in Crisis Core. Who turned into sparkles when he died!

Not everything can just disappear into energy, right, you need living things dying and rotting and composting to make up soil and stuff! If plants just disappear when they die, what do people eat, what were all these buildings made from? Plus he distinctly remembers coal being a thing in this setting, there was a whole town that got shafted because of it and everything, so fossil fuels exist, therefore stuff must leave behind physical remains! Except when it doesn't?

So! Is death like instant ascending here? Or like it *descending,* since all energy returns to the Planet? Sephiroth is pretty sure that Aerith left behind a body, and there were definitely corpses in the original game - but again, in the prequel it was really unclear. Enemies in combat disappeared, but cutscene death left a body. Except when it didn't!

Ah, the limitations of technology.

Still, he's interested in seeing how the creatures would look and feel and compare them to those he knows from PIDW. Final Fantasy VII had some really weird monsters, and he has a bet going with himself about how much they resemble awakened beasts or yaoguai.

Angeal looks at him and then smiles, hoisting the Buster Sword to his back. "Ready to go, then?"

"Ready," Sephiroth agrees.

"We're going to have to talk to the Colonel first, but don't worry - I'll handle the talking," Angeal says. "He's an… old-fashioned soldier."

Sephiroth arches a brow. It sounds like a warning. "Which means…?"

"He doesn't like SOLDIER, he thinks we're stuck up and get our abilities handed to us, we don't deserve our reputation, the usual stuff," Angeal shrugs. "Just ignore it and let me handle it."

"... If you say so."

They head outside together, and Sephiroth takes a moment to look around and try to be an objective observer. This place isn't really anything like the towns back home, in PIDW - the aesthetics are mixed, and though they're more like home than Midgar was, it's as if the place was squeezed through a funhouse mirror. It's just a little off.

And of course, there are no locals anywhere to be seen for a full comparison - just Shinra troops, infantry men and SOLDIERs. Who, the moment they notice him and Angeal, stop to stare and point and whisper.

Has the… incident in Midgar already spread this far, or is this really what it's like being Sephiroth all the time?

Depressing.

"Here," Angeal says and leads him to another house, apparently being used by the Colonel. "Remember, let me do the talking. You just stand there and look imposing, okay?"

Sephiroth snorts. "I think I can manage that."

The Colonel didn't look happy to see them, but then, he doesn't look like a man that's ever really happy. He sizes Sephiroth up and then scoffs. "It's about time. I don't know what kind of *discipline* you SOLDIER Firsts enjoy in Midgar, but this is a war front, sir, there are rules here."

Does that mean Sephiroth isn't a General then?

"Right, you're right, of course, sir," Angeal says placatingly. "Well, we're here now, and we already have missions lined up, so -"

The Colonel ignores him and comes around his desk and to Sephiroth's face. "You've been in and out of Wutai for most of this war, isn't that correct, SOLDIER?"

Sephiroth blinks at the man, slowly. "I suppose so." Behind the Colonel Angeal looks panicked.

"What was that?" The Colonel asks dangerously, narrowing his eyes. "You *suppose* so?"

Sephiroth narrows his eyes back.

The Colonel continues. "When talking to an officer of *superior rank*, you answer *yes sir,* or *no sir*. You do not suppose! Now, do you have experience in the war or not, SOLDIER?!"

Oh, someone is feeling very insecure in their boots, aren't they?

Now, Sephiroth could handle this with all the tact and delicacy of Shen Qingqiu… but even Shen Qingqiu wouldn't have swallowed *that*

kind of spiel without biting. The original definitely wouldn't have! And Sephiroth is supposed to be a villain… well.

Sephiroth smiles - the Colonel recoils.

Last night he'd reread everything there was on his phone about Wutai, going through all his missions again, trying to get as much intelligence as he could. Funny, the things the tutorial left out.

"I'm sorry," Sephiroth says sweetly. "Who are you?"

The Colonel goes a little red. "Excuse me, SOLDIER?"

"You're barking at me as though at a private, expecting me to go *yes sir* and *no sir,"* Sephiroth says mockingly. "And yet I have no clue as to who you even are."

Behind the Colonel Angeal gapes and then lifts a pleading look to the ceiling.

The Colonel sputters. "You, you - How *dare -"*

Ah, you gotta love zero IQ bullies.

"I was given a whole slew of missions and orders," Sephiroth says softly. "All are very vital and high priority. I'm to slay monsters that have killed your men, I'm to hunt down spies you've clearly failed to find, I'm to clear a guard station you haven't been able to get near, I'm to weaken a fortress you cannot even *touch,* and ten other things besides. All my mission files are very clear. And you know what they all have in common?"

He leans a little closer to the Colonel - right in his purple face. "Not a single one of them mentions *you."*

Then, before the Colonel can recover, Sephiroth turns on his heel with an imaginary mike drop and saunters out, feeling a whole lot better about everything. The sun is shining, the troopers are scattering at the mere sight of him, and the air is fresh and sweet with natural Qi.

Already this day is looking up.

Angeal, clearly deciding that evasion was the better part of valour, hurries after him. "We're going to pay for that later, you know," he says, sounding defeated.

Of that Sephiroth doesn't have any doubts. What good is a one-time

bully? There'd either be a horrifying scene of comeuppance to bring home the realities of war, or a heartfelt discovery and understanding about *how they're not so different after all,* or whatever else.

"We'll burn that bridge when we get to it," Sephiroth says cheerfully. "Now. I was promised *monsters."*

Angeal sighs, glancing back at the house commandeered by the Colonel. "... I guess we better clear out anyway. Alright," he motions. "Right this way to the monsters."

Sephiroth grins at his bitchy tone, and together they head out.

Well, Sephiroth seems to be in a better mood than yesterday. Maybe he was just coming down from his… whatever it was that happened in the training room. Angeal still isn't entirely sure. Though the Turks had debriefed him and even showed him a video, it didn't make that much sense. Especially with the blood vomiting. Which Angeal still isn't entirely over, either.

But Sephiroth seems, while still not quite *himself,* at least cheered up. He'd relaxed in increments during their walk into the woods, and the change of environment - or most likely, leaving the camp and its staring occupants behind - made him a little less closed off.

"This place is so *alive,"* Sephiroth comments, peering up at the leaf canopy above then. "The air is so fresh."

"Mmhmm," Angeal smiles. "A welcome change from Midgar, huh?"

From the way he's looking around them, carefully taking in everything, Sephiroth can't remember much of anything about Wutai either - it's all new to him. Seeing his fascination kind of makes Angeal want to see his take on Mideel. Or, hell, Gongaga. Sephiroth would be very entertained by the local wildlife there, going by his reactions now.

"What is this thing?" Sephiroth asks, holding up what looks like a fistful of long grass. It wiggles in his hold, little legs kicking at the air.

"Razor Weed - I think the locals call it Leg-Cutting Grass," Angeal says, leaning in to watch the spiky beast wiggling in Sephiroth's grip. "They're pretty common and can deflate truck tires."

Sephiroth turns the little monster this way and that while it makes angry noises at him. "I bet. It's it a plant or an animal?"

"Uh. I don't actually know?" Angeal offers and gives him a look. "Someone back at the camp might. All I know is that they're annoying to fight."

Sephiroth hums, considering the weed, testing the blades sticking out of its head. He seems to struggle with something before sighing. "I can't kill it, it's too cute." He sounds almost disappointed.

"... It's just a monster?" Angeal says, giving him a weird look. "I've seen men almost lose their legs, stepping into these things."

"Sounds like their own fault," Sephiroth says and crouches down to let the angry weed go. "Off you go, little buddy."

The Razor Weed answers by trying to attack him with its grass blades, all but lunging at him. Sephiroth just snorts and flicks it into the forest with his finger. "Cute," he concludes.

Angeal scratches at the back of his head. Though low-level mobs aren't really that big of a deal, still… "We're supposed to be, ah, weeding the monster population here, you know. That includes Razor Weeds."

"It's just a little grass thing," Sephiroth says. "It barely reaches your knee!"

"They're a menace and can cast spells," Angeal points out. "Your usual Infantry troopers can barely -"

"They *cast spells?"* Sephiroth asks, fascinated, and stands up, looking around interestedly. "I want to see that! Let's go find another."

Oh, boy. Running a hand through his hair, Angeal hurries after him. Well, it's… a novel experience, seeing Sephiroth of all people so excited about something. And of course it would be monsters. Usually Sephiroth is more interested in *fighting* monsters rather than just observing them, though, but it's still a definite improvement to his mood from yesterday. Even if it's because of *weeds.*

That changes when they get surrounded by about half a dozen of the little monsters.

"Still cute?" Angeal asks, fending two of them off with the flat of the Buster Sword's blade.

Apparently, yes, going by the glow in Sephiroth's eyes. "Don't kill them yet, I want to see some spells!" The man - the maniac - says, using still sheathed Masamune to push the monsters back.

"You know, as much as I appreciate your scientific curiosity, these things can actually do some damage in bigger groups, you know!" Angeal calls to him.

"Yeah, yeah," Sephiroth answers, flippantly. "So what do we need to do to make them cast spells?"

One of the Razor Weeds answers for him - by casting a Magic Hammer on Sephiroth. Which, Angeal is pretty sure, Sephiroth just *lets it happen!* Thankfully it's not a physical attack - Magic Hammer hits you in the MP - though, looking at Sephiroth's reaction…

"Oh, you little Qi-stealing *bastard,"* Sephiroth says, and that's that for the Razor Weeds.

"... Uh," Angeal says, while the Razor Weeds fall over, mowed down like so much grass, and Sephiroth stands over them looking very hurt and disappointed. Angeal clears his throat, trying to bite back a smile. "So. What did we learn?"

Sephiroth rubs at his stomach, and gives him a flat look. "Yeah, haha, rub it in," he mutters and then, "Oh, hey, they left the remains behind!"

"... Most things do when you kill them, yes," Angeal agrees and looks at him interestedly. "So, you remember Mako monsters?"

Sephiroth is crouching again, examining the dead Razor Weeds. "Mm?"

"Monsters that converge around Mako concentrations," Angeal explains, hoisting Buster Sword back to his back. "You… don't remember?"

"Uh. I remember that some things just sort of… disperse instead of leaving anything physical?" Sephiroth asks, sounding rather hopeful. "Is that a thing, or…?"

"It's a thing - Mako monsters. They're attracted to Mako, they are common around reactors and natural Mako pools - so people call them Mako monsters," Angeal explains. "The slums under Midgar are full of them. They're kind of like more physical ghosts, I think."

"... Huh," Sephiroth hums, and pokes at the dead Razor Weeds. "So monsters around here…?"

"Mostly physical," Angeal agrees. "I think there are some natural Mako springs around here, so there might be Mako monsters too… but I haven't seen any personally."

"Hmmm," Sephiroth hums and stands up. "That is *fascinating."*

"It sure is," Angeal laughs, because it really isn't, not to him, but Sephiroth has always been a bit weird. "Shall we continue? There's many more monsters to see."

"Yes, let's."

"... And get hit by," Angeal adds and looks at Sephiroth. "Actually, are you going to let all of them get a hit in? Because if you are, I'd like to know ahead of time, just in case I need to have a Remedy in hand."

"I'm not going to let myself get hit again," Sephiroth says, primly. "I wouldn't have, if I realised what it was going to do."

"... Okay. Good." Angeal nods. "There are better ways to figure out your opponents' skillsets, anyway. And you can just let them do their thing but *get out of the way* before it hits."

"Right, of course, that's something you can do," Sephiroth says, sheepish, and clears his throat. "I knew that."

Angeal gets a Remedy out, just in case.

36-39

What do you get when you take the random encounters of a turn-based RPG and add a hefty dose of action RPG, and then turn *that* into a semi-realistic world? You get absolute *shitton* of critters.

There's *so many* . Not just types, of which there admittedly aren't that many. There are lizards called Tail Vaults that try to headgrab you, there are huge beetle bugs called, weirdly, Bizarre Bugs that either try to body slam you or poison you, depending on whether they feel like flying or not, there are birds that try to *electrocute* you, which are, disappointingly, called Thunderbirds - disappointing, because they're barely the size of falcons and something called *Thunderbird* should honestly be bigger…

Sephiroth is really starting to feel at home here! While the monsters of Final Fantasy VII so far aren't exactly impressing him with their variety or imaginativeness, they're just about on par with PIDW with how fucking *annoying they are.*

Because they never fucking stop coming!

"You know, I was really enjoying this," Sephiroth comments after another random encounter with half a dozen or so mixed mobs. "I was having such a good day. But these things just don't stop coming, do they?"

"Welcome to Wutai, it's all bugs and angry grasses from here to the bitter end," Angeal agrees. "Just be glad there aren't any Adamantaimai here."

"What's that?"

"Big turtle with a bunch of shield magic that throws all your attacks back at you."

"Ooh, I want to see one!" Sephiroth says excitedly.

"Sephiroth, *no,"* Angeal says firmly.

"But -"

"Firstly, they live in the northern end of Wutai, so it would be a week's trek there, and for two we have our hands full here," Angeal says. "We're not going to see Adamantaimai."

Sephiroth sighs. "Fine," he mutters and looks ahead. "Oh, look, more bugs."

"Back to it, then," Angeal agrees, adjusting his gloves.

Though they can't seem to take more than twenty steps before running into more monsters, the fights themselves aren't hard. It's actually really cool, to just mow them down in single swings like he can! The Liu-shidi vibes are incredible, just, ten out of ten. And the more Sephiroth fights, the more comfortable with his body he becomes. He can almost feel his meridians unwinding!

It's really quite something to be in a body that feels so at ease, swinging a sword around. Though he could've done without the whole *villain alien hybrid who will one day try to destroy us all* thing, there's something really nice about fighting now. Like Shen Qingqiu felt at ease reading or painting or playing music, Sephiroth's feels most comfortable swinging a sword.

It's really becoming more and more apparent by the moment that Sephiroth's body is best suited for physical cultivation. He can just feel his stress levels coming down!

Ah, but he would really like a little break to take in the rest of what Wutai wildlife has to offer too! The forest around them isn't just a backdrop in a battle screen, there's all kinds of interesting plants, and he's pretty sure he's seen some familiar trees, and Sephiroth would really like to take a closer look!

"Can we take a break?" he asks, trying not to sound too plaintive after the umpteenth fight against endlessly spawning mobs.

"Are you getting tired?" Angela asks, alarmed.

Honestly he doesn't even feel like he's been exercising. Sephiroth has a fucking golden body, it's ridiculous. "No. I just want a break."

"Yeah, sure - we'll take a break," Angeal says and deals away with the rest of their most recent patch of enemies. "What's going on - are you alright?"

"I'm fine - I just want to take a look at that tree over there," Sephiroth says, nodding. There's a really huge tree a little ways from them, big enough that it's visible at a distance and past the other trees.

"Huh? I mean, sure?" Angeal says and looks. "Um, why? I guess it's

pretty impressive - is there something wrong with it?"

No, it just looks like a ginkgo tree. Sephiroth shrugs and, after making sure they're not about to be stormed by another swarm of low-level mobs, walks over to the tree.

It *is* a ginkgo tree, a really old one - old enough that if it was in PIDW, the locals would've already started giving it tributes in expectation of its awakening. It's so big it's starting to push out other trees around it, outcompeting them for space and sunlight, and so creating a clearing around itself.

It really… looks like a stray piece of home. Though there weren't that many ginkgo trees on Cang Qiong Mountain, there were some - including one really impressive one on the Beast Peak, which they were expecting to awaken any year now. The disciples used to hang charms from its branches.

Sephiroth puts his sword away as he approaches the tree. Feeling a bit silly but also not wanting to be rude, he bows to the tree before going closer. Gently, he rests his hand against the tree trunk. It takes some effort… but he can feel the Qi flowing in the tree trunk. There's a lot of it, too.

The tree is not awakening - but at the same time is not… *not* awakened already?

Probably something to do with the cyclic nature of souls in this world. Everything is sort of reincarnation of everything else - so the Qi in the tree is thousands of years old, thousands of lives lived.

"... Sephiroth?" Angeal asks quietly. "What are you, um…?"

"This tree is old. Very old," Sephiroth says - then bites his tongue on the natural conclusion of that statement in *old as balls.* Trying not to lose his composure, he looks up. "No trees like these near Midgar."

"... No, there aren't," Angeal agrees, eyeing him. "Can you… *feel* something from the tree?"

Sephiroth looks down at him. "You mean the Lifestream coursing through it?"

Angeal looks a bit startled at that before shrugging, uncomfortable. "I know they all say that Lifestream is just a bunch of nonsense - but it's like you said," he says. "No trees like this around Midgar."

"Mn," Sephiroth hums.

"You know, sometimes I wonder what might've happened if they built a reactor in the Mideel Islands," Angeal says, considering the tree. "They say the ground is too unstable and there's too many earthquakes, but… if they had…"

Mideel is this world's version of the Pacific islands, right? "All your weird apple trees would've died, probably," Sephiroth muses.

"How dare you call our apples weird, sir," Angeal says, mock offended. "I would have you know, Banora Whites are my hometown's main export!"

"Don't you call them stupid apples or something?"

" *Dumb* apples," Angeal says with a huff.

"I rest my case," Sephiroth snorts and looks up at the Ginkgo tree. Sunlight is screening through the leaves, like dancing sparkles of gold, and if he was Shen Qingqiu, he'd try his hand at a poem for it just about now. Maybe he could do a bit of meditation here…

And of course that's when there's a sound of twigs snapping and leaves rustling somewhere behind them as something large and probably angry comes their way. Damn.

"I guess break time is over," Sephiroth mutters and grabs his sword. "I know there's an *Enemy Lure* materia - is there an Enemy Repellant one?"

"If I ever find one, I'll let you know," Angeal says, putting his fists up.

And they're back into the fray.

Though they've fought and slain what now feels like countless monsters, they've made little progress in their actual mission - which was to find a group of Foulanders that had appeared near the military camp. Though they'd seen some hints of them, the monsters themselves are nowhere to be seen, instead they've fought - and inspected - just about every other thing the forest has to offer.

Angeal feels strange even thinking about it, but… Sephiroth is holding the mission back. Not because he isn't willing or capable, he's more

than! More than half of the kills are by him, and done with ease! But… he keeps stopping and stalling to make observations, examining the monsters, the terrain, particularly interesting plants, the trees - once he even stops to take in the scenery when they encounter a little hilltop. All which, while weirdly endearing in the strangest way, is not what Sephiroth usually does on missions.

No, usually Sephiroth just bulldozes through his opponents, finishes the mission in record time and then does whatever he wants *after*… which usually means taking on and completing the next nearest mission to his location. Rinse and repeat.

Now it's getting late, and they're nowhere near finishing their first one for the day.

"Alright, I guess we're camping here tonight," Angeal muses while Sephiroth examines a local fruit tree interestingly.

"Alright," Sephiroth agrees, picking a fruit and taking a curious sniff. "Aww, it's not ripe," he mutters. "Maybe higher up in the tree…"

Angeal watches as the most famous SOLDIER in history goes fruit-picking and then shakes his head, going about setting a camp. They have no actual camping gear, he honestly hadn't thought to bring any with the complete expectation that not only would the mission not take long but they'd probably finish a few more while at it before heading back. Apparently not!

Whatever made Sephiroth so obsessive about completing missions before has gone the same way a lot of other motivations he had for his previous habits went.

Setting up a fire in Wutai forest isn't the best idea, so Angeal picks what looks like the most comfortable spot to sleep and sits down to check the Buster Sword. He'd mostly used his fists, as per usual, but he'd tried his hand using his sword too. It was… still pretty difficult.

Sephiroth joins him with an armful of fruit. "Want some fruit?" he offers.

Angeal gives them a look. "Are you sure that's edible?" he asks dubiously.

"Sure it is. It's hawthorn," Sephiroth agrees. "Pity we don't have the stuff to prepare them - I bet these would make great tanghulu."

"... Which is?"

"Fruits coated in rock sugar," Sephiroth shrugs and sits down on a protruding knot of a tree root. "Here, try some."

Angeal accepts a fruit from him. Sephiroth doesn't remember monster names or what they even are, but he remembers random sweets and apparently how to make them. Meanwhile Angeal didn't even know he *liked* sweets. For them to be the things that really stuck around while he forgot so many other things…

Angeal tries the little red fruit. It's not bad. A bit tart.

"So, no… tent or anything?" Sephiroth asks after finishing a handful of fruit.

"What, can't handle sleeping under the stars?" Angeal asks, turning his attention back to his sword.

"Hm," Sephiroth hums, tugging at his sleeve cuffs with a strange expression before looking around, taking in the forest around them. "I suppose we need to take watches."

"Yep," Angeal agrees. "I can take the first one."

"It's fine, I'll handle it. I want to get some practice in anyway," Sephiroth says, setting the rest of the fruit aside. "Unless that will bring more monsters to us."

"They don't usually attack you when you're still - just when you're moving through their territories," Angeal assures him. "So it should be fine. But better be on guard anyway."

Sephiroth smirks a little at that and then stands up with a stretch and takes Masamune in hand. "Well then…"

"Are you going to do your… energy alignment thing?" Angeal asks worriedly

"Not here, that's just asking for a Qi-deviation," Sephiroth mutters. "Just some forms."

"You'd think you'd gotten enough practice down for the day already," Angeal points out, though more curiously than anything. "All we've done is fight this whole day. One would think you'd be looking forward to winding down a little." Angeal knows he is.

Sephiroth looks at him thoughtfully. "This is how my body winds down," he says and holds Masamune up in a guard pose. "Call it sword meditation. Besides, today wasn't exactly good exercise."

"... Sephiroth, I *lost track* of how many fights we had," Angeal points out flatly.

Sephiroth snorts. "A few basic sword forms per fight - that's nothing. And I didn't see you using anything more elaborate than an uppercut or a high kick."

"Well, they worked, did they?"

"Yes, but what did you learn from them? Did you progress at all in your combat abilities?" Sephiroth asks pointedly and makes a delicate swing with his sword. "Did you grow at all?"

Angeal leans back a little, weirdly insulted. "I got a whole bunch of EXP?"

Sephiroth blinks and looks at him, his sword lowering slightly. "Did you *really?"* he asks incredulously.

"Yeah," Angeal shrugs. "Not enough to level up, but still a bunch."

Sephiroth states at him blankly for a moment. Then he lowers his sword completely. "Wait, EXP is a *real thing?!"*

"Um. Yes? You don't… remember?" Angeal asks worriedly, standing up. "Didn't you get any?"

"How does that even - no, I do remember, and I read about it in the tutorials, but I didn't think it was real! But it is. You actually get *experience points* from the things you kill," Sephiroth says, sounding baffled. "That's a - *really?"*

"It's, uh," Angeal tries to reframe the whole concept of EXP in his head. "I guess it does sound kind of strange. Uh, EXP is just the acronym Shinra came up with. It's not actually *experience.* It's just, you know… energy."

"Energy," Sephiroth repeats.

"Yeah," Angeal says. "You absorb the energy from things you kill. You… really didn't notice?"

"Um," Sephiroth says. "No, I didn't - how would I know? What does it

feel like, how can you te *ll?"*

Angeal clears his throat. "I just - do? There is actual equipment to measure it, but when you do the kind of work we do, after a while you can just tell. After a fight you just feel a bit… more, I guess?"

Sephiroth frowns, putting a hand on his stomach.

"You really didn't notice it at all?" Angeal asks, concerned. "You *are* higher level than me - I guess, at your level enemies like we've been fighting wouldn't really yield a noticeable amount of EXP." Which is weird, because Angeal got a lot.

"No, I think… I've been blocking it," Sephiroth says thoughtfully.

That's - what? "You've been - how? The only thing I know that can block EXP gain is a Curse - wait," Angeal says and takes a closer look at him. "Do you have a Cursed Ring on you, or something?"

"There are *curses* now?!" Sephiroth asks, exasperated.

"Not curses - *a* Curse, it halts your growth," Angeal explains and checks him over, baffled. Sephiroth isn't wearing any accessories. Huh. "You don't feel like you have a Curse?"

"Well, that's good to know!" Sephiroth says and shakes his head, stepping back. He's quiet for a moment, still with his hand on his stomach and then he shrugs, far too careless and casual. "Ah, never mind, Angeal, I'll figure it out," Sephiroth says and grips Masamune's hilt again. "Whatever. I'm going to practise now."

He *definitely* knows what the issue is. *"Sephiroth -"*

Ignoring him, Sephiroth starts swinging his sword, working through his forms with a sort of stubborn ferocity that clearly states the discussion is over.

After a moment Angeal lets out a sigh, fighting back that feeling of uneasy tension building up again. "Okay, okay, fine," he says, holding up his hands in surrender. "Can I practise with you?"

Sephiroth glances at him and then arches a brow. "I don't know," he says and smirks. "Can you?"

What have we learned? Well, for one, Sephiroth *really* misses qiankun storages, and the fact that Final Fantasy VII infinite inventories don't seem to be actually real is very disappointing. Two, he seems to have brought back more than just knowledge from PIDW.

His meridian system, though still scarred and unyielding, has already adapted to a cultivator's natural defences against outward energies.

Which makes sense! If a cultivator lets stuff like Final Fantasy VII EXP into their system without properly working that energy into something safe they can use, they'd be courting Qi-deviation *all the time.* That kind of openness, in a world with the Five Phases and resentful energies - never mind demonic ones! - would be deadly to any cultivator.

One of the first things he'd learned as Shen Qingqiu was to shield himself from that kind of thing. Shen Qingqiu was prone to Qi-deviations in the original text, something he didn't have the time for! So he'd figured out what he was good at, what his element was, and he stuck to it. And he's proud to say he didn't have a Qi-deviation, not even once, in all his years as Shen Qingqiu. Not even with Without a Cure gnawing at his meridians!

But Final Fantasy VII works by different rules. They have different energies. Everyone takes in a portion of the Qi from their kills - a portion of their share of the Lifestream, maybe? And that's normal! The whole world is mired in this huge energy recycling and redistribution system, and Qi-deviations simply aren't a thing.

There's just, you know, madness and memory loss and weird mutations, though that was mostly Mako and Jenova… probably.

Running a hand over his neck, Sephiroth glances to where Angeal sits propped up against a crooked tree, arms folded and head nodding with his breaths, fast asleep. Angeal… who's been acting as a sponge to all the stray energy coming off from their kills.

The whole thing makes Sephiroth feel a little ill. It's probably fine - Angeal actually seems to think he'd benefited from it at Sephiroth's expense! It's what the people of this world are used to, it's what they've *evolved* with! They actually can grow really strong with it! Sephiroth should know, he grinded both Cloud and Zack to the highest level, and they were really OP!

And yet it… still feels wrong. Sephiroth feels kinda like an awful master, making ignorant disciples to absorb resentful energy so that

he didn't have to. They were a couple of those in PIDW, awful shifus abusing Binghe's future wifes for their own benefit, and Shen Yuan hated each and every one of them.

Ugh.

Okay, okay. EXP versus Qi. Maybe it's different? Since this world has an energy recycling system, not a *rebirth* system, maybe there are just aspects to it he doesn't get? There probably are! Honestly, for all that it all *feels familiar* , it also feels a little.. off.

Even here, in the middle of this very lively and monster-filled forest… Sephiroth can't feel much *nuance* from the place. The forest feels *alive,* just teeming with energy, but that's… kind of it? For a place that *should* be aligned with the element of Wood or maybe Earth, it doesn't exactly feel like it.

So, maybe instead of different elements, here there are different *stages* of energy. Like Lifestream and Materia are the same thing in different stages of matter, maybe everything else is… somewhere in between? MP, magic, and EXP, all just different expressions of the same energy? Hmm…

Maybe EXP is like - like natural photosynthesis? No, that doesn't make sense, uh… spiritual respiration, maybe? Energy digestion? A whole different, but fundamental aspect of local evolution, either way. It would make sense, on a planet that's literally *alive,* like an *organism.*

Ugh, he hates making guesses. Where's his wikis and fan sites full of meta analysis and worldbuilding theories when he needs them?!

Sighing with frustration, Sephiroth looks through his phone again, reading the pertinent tutorial entries. They aren't particularly useful. There's nothing about the Lifestream, very little about Mako and not much at all about Materia, aside from how to equip it and use it. *People believe that the knowledge of the Ancients is trapped within the Materia,* yeah, sure, but like. How? What kind of *knowledge?*

Thoughtful, Sephiroth reaches for Masamune, resting on the tree roots beside him, and carefully eases one of the marbles of Materia out of its handle. Unlike the forest, the Materia *definitely* has an element. Specifically, Fire. Rolling the little green orb in his fingers, Sephiroth considers the feel of it at length, sending his spiritual senses, such as they are, into it.

It feels kinda alive. A bit like the ginkgo tree, actually, but much *more.*

It feels like the accumulation of energy over generations and cycles, and lives.

It also feels a bit like *Fire burns.* Which is. Uh. Well. It certainly is a type of knowledge?

What does that mean for other types of Materia? *Ice is cold, lightning goes boom,* maybe? *Recovery means to heal?* Huh.

Interesting. But not as much as the knowledge that the Materia, like Angeal, is still *growing.* Which, yeah, Sephiroth knew that was a thing, it happened in the games, Materia levels up and even spawns offsprings and everything, but *man.* It's something very different to *feel it* with your own spiritual senses.

Materia are a breed of sorta-kinda awakened spirit stones! *Wild.*

None of which helps him with his EXP dilemma. At this rate he might have to just set aside everything that holds true about cultivation back home and write a whole new cultivation manual, or something. Call it… Lifestream Cultivation. Evening You Need to Know, Cultivating in a Sci-fi Fantasy Dystopia On the Brink of Collapse!

Yeah, Sephiroth would like to know what he needs to know, please. Not that it would probably help, he'll still need to do the work…

… and none of it makes his overall situation as *Sephiroth* any easier. It's anything, he's probably making everything worse, acting all weird!

Sighing, Sephiroth lowers the orb of Materia and puts it back into its proper place before looking up at the sky. There's a moon shining past the tree branches. The forest is softly rustling around them as Angeal quietly snores, and a gentle breeze moves through the treetops. Thankfully, the old edict of random encounters holds true - they only happen when you're moving! Very handy, that.

It doesn't quite sound or smell or feel like home. Spiritual Mountain Bamboo has its own distinctive vibe, and Sephiroth hasn't even seen any regular Bamboo in this place. Still, it's beautiful. Wild and full of life and extremely inhospitable to its hostile invaders.

Yeah.

Sephiroth isn't sure how long he can put off making a decision here.

Reno has decided he hates sleeping in a tree. He doesn't particularly enjoy any aspect of camping but he especially dislikes sleeping in trees. Even with a hammock to pitch between branches, it's never comfortable.

Stupid SOLDIERs and their stupid endless stamina. Sephiroth and Hewley didn't even bother to make a camp or anything, they just slept wherever! Incredible. Not that Reno thinks Sephiroth actually slept at all. Sure, Reno didn't either, because the forest did not shut up all night and the fuck can sleep with all the noise, but still. Even after a day of fighting monsters and evening of sword practice, Sephiroth just doesn't quit, huh. The guy has issues.

Glancing over the edge of his hammock to see Hewley still asleep and Sephiroth sitting cross-legged, actually meditating, Reno lies back and sighs. So much for SOLDIERs not knowing when to quit, huh?

After a moment of waiting while the sky above grows slowly lighter and all the damn bugs in the forest wake up for the whole new day of being nuisances, Reno digs out his PHS and shoots out a message.

Reno: If I have to spend another night in this damn forest, listening to Sephiroth's constant sighing, I'm going to lose it. Tell me you're done.

Rude: Your life is a constant struggle. Charcoal burner's house checks out. I'm back at the camp for supplies now.

Reno: Ooh, what did we get?

Rude: Two weeks worth of rations, and a case of contraband.

Reno: Finally some good news! I'll see if I can get the meatheads there before the day is out. Save some of that contraband for me.

Rude doesn't answer, and Reno settles down to wait for the SOLDIER Firsts to get up and get moving. Sephiroth does first - rising, of course, to do some more sword practice.

Reno watches him work for a while before adding annotation to the watch log. *07:34, Sephiroth begins solo sword practice, no visible signs of his "energy alignment" practice.* From Sephiroth's comments, he figures the guy is being careful with it, and doesn't want to be interrupted again - something he's already made a note of in his ongoing report.

This mission involves way too much paperwork already, and way too

many questions. Sephiroth doesn't take in EXP anymore, apparently. There's something called Qi-deviation - his fit, maybe - which he's trying to avoid. He's now meditating with Materia, which is - something. And it's Reno's job to figure out explanations for all of this.

He's doing the work of a Science researcher, basically, observing Sephiroth like a lab rat for all sorts of unusual behaviours. Except he's doing it behind the Science Department's back. Wonderful.

Reno waits until Hewley shows signs of waking up before sending out the data package Tseng had prepared. Then he lies still, staring up at the forest canopy, listening.

"Good morning," Sephiroth says somewhere below. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah, good morning - wait, it's morning? Sephiroth, you didn't wake me up?" Hewley asks. "I meditated most of the night, it's fine," Sephiroth says, dismissively. "I figured I might as well let you sleep, since I was going to stay up anyway."

"That's - considerate of you, but we agreed to change shifts," Hewley points out. "You should've woken me up anyway."

"What's the point of both of us staying awake?"

"It's not about what - Sephiroth, I know you've forgotten a lot about how this goes, but we're supposed to be a team," Hewley says slowly, pointedly. "And I would've liked to be included in the decision making."

"... Ah. I didn't… think of that."

"Just - wake me up next time," Hewley sighs.

Point in Hewley's favour there, for not letting Sephiroth get away with this shit. Reno definitely wouldn't have.

There's a sound of Hewley getting up just as both their PHS's beep out a notification.

"Another mission?" Sephiroth asks.

"Mm, yeah," Hewley agrees, and judging by the sound of it he's looking through the mission files. "Hmm, there are monsters attacking a, uh, charcoal burner's house. They want us to clear them out."

"Sounds bad. Should we put off the other monster hunting mission for

now?"

"... Yeah, maybe. Might be that it's an informant's house, or something," Hewley mutters. "Don't see why else they'd send us to help Wutai citizens."

Sephiroth says nothing.

Reno lifts his PHS to make another note before stopping. Sephiroth's apparent… unease has already been noted, and a bit of silence isn't exactly a clear sign of mutiny. The guy has second thoughts - like just about every asshole sent to the front. Nothing new about that.

Except for the fact that Sephiroth isn't *allowed* to have second thoughts, according to his files.

"Do you have any of those fruits left?" Hewley asks. "I'm hungry."

"Yeah, I picked some more earlier - and I think there's some rambutan over there too…" Sephiroth says, and there's a sound of him walking over. "Huh, here they are. Didn't notice them in the dark yesterday. Here, catch."

"Oh, those are edible?"

"Yes, you just peel them. Tastes a bit like grape," Sephiroth says and picks some more while muttering under his breath, "What they're doing growing out here though, I don't know."

"Nice. You remember Wutai pretty well, huh? Being able to forage and all."

"... I guess so."

Shutting his PHS off as quietly as he can, Reno puts his hands behind his neck and listens with a scowl as the SOLDIER Firsts enjoy fruit for breakfast. All he has is a few power bars. Che.

"Genesis sent me a message," Hewley comments. "Apparently Hojo is tearing his way through the SOLDIER program."

"... Oh?" Sephiroth asks, his voice audibly tensing.

"Yeah. More tests, observation, and a bunch of Seconds have been called in for extra injections."

"..."

"Yeah," Angeal answered. "Listen to this; Hojo's also taken personal interest in the SOLDIER cadet selection process and has stated that he'll be doing the Mako reaction tests himself."

"... Cadet selection process?" Sephiroth asks. "Is that for selecting new SOLDIER members?"

"Yeah. You probably don't remember, right? When they pick who gets to become a SOLDIER, there's a bunch of tests. Mostly they're physical - and once you pass those, you have to pass Mako reactivity tests. Not everyone can handle Mako injections, so…" Hewley trails away.

"... How many candidates are there usually?"

"Hundred or so in each batch. Of them, maybe ten make it through the whole selection process."

"I see," Sephiroth murmurs. "Hojo taking interest in that is… probably not a good thing."

Hewley says nothing.

Reno grimaces. Yeah, the creepy Head of the Science Department definitely wasn't happy that they yoinked his favourite lab rat from his grip huh. Here's hoping there won't be other incidents - though if there are, they will be Tseng and Cissnei's problem. Reno and Rude have their hands busy here, with these schmucks.

"Nothing we can do about that here," Hewley says. "Ready to set out?"

"You don't want to warm up first?" Sephiroth asks. "We could do some forms."

"I'll warm up enough on the way there - there'll still be a lot of monsters between us and the house."

"Ah."

"Did you… " Hewley hesitates. "Did you figure out the whole thing with your EXP gain?"

"Yeah, more or less. Don't worry about it. There's still some hawthorn fruits left - do you want them?"

Reno rolls his eyes. Spoken like a man pasting posters on his walls to hide the holes in his house. Who would've thought that Sephiroth was such a shitty liar?

Sephiroth and Hewley set out, and Reno sits up with a stretch, the hammock rocking side to side underneath him. His neck is all fucked up from his sleeping position, but hell, at least he didn't have to sleep on the ground.

Easing himself onto the tree branches, Reno packs the hammock away and then drops down. There are just seeds and skins left from the fruits the SOLDIERs had been eating. Nothing left for him. Assholes.

Sighing, Reno picks some unripened hawthorn fruits from the tree he'd seen Sephiroth pick them from and heads after the SOLDIERs, to continue his watch duty.

This month's bonus had better be worth all this.

40

"My king told me - Junshang asked to see this lowly cultivator?"

"Shishu thinks too lowly of himself. Surely he's still a Peak Lord of The Cang Qiong Mountain Sect, is he not?"

The great hall in the Northern Fortress hall is empty, bar the two of them, all the demonic courtiers dismissed. The emptiness of the place makes its gleaming floors and vaulted ceiling seem vaster than it even usually seems, as every word echoes in the icy palace.

The Demon Lord sitting upon the throne isn't the Northern King, however - but his master. The Half Heavenly Demon, Luo Binghe.

And the man before him was once - and in some ways still is - his Martial Uncle, Peak Lord Shang Qinghua of Cang Qiong Mountain Sect's An Ding Peak.

Who is, quite plainly, shaking in his boots.

"Haha," he laughs, desperate, "I suppose they haven't kicked me out yet?"

Luo Binghe blinks, slow, like a predator.

Shang Qinghua squirms. "What - what can this Shishu do for Lord Luo?"

"Today this Lord announced a hunt," Luo Binghe said. "For any artefact, knowledge or skill that has to do with the transmigration of souls."

Shang Qinghua startles at that, then gapes at the Demon Lord, and then he looks at the floor. "That is - very interesting, my Lord?" he manages.

"Any member of this Lord's court that brings credible information is to be rewarded a *wish* within this Lord's ability to grant," Luo Binghe continues, watching him closely, unblinking.

Shang Qinghua looks helplessly away. "A - an incredible boon for anyone -" he gulps, as he sees something sharp and blue in the corner of his eye.

WARNING, it says, in bold, flashing letters.

"Mobei-jun then informed this Lord that his servant," Luo Binghe puts an emphasis on that, "has secret knowledge. That he speaks of other worlds. Of things this world lacks."

Shang Qinghua wets his lips, swallows, says nothing.

Luo Binghe is still and silent for a moment, watching him writhe. "Do you know why you have been called before this Lord?"

"This lowly one dares not guess," the Peak Lord of An Ding barely whispers, as the flashing blue screen presses closer.

Another slow predator's blink. "Is Shishu afraid?"

Shang Qinghua is terrified, thanks! "Lord Luo is powerful and unpredictable."

The Demon Lord scoffs and stands - and moves away while Shang Qinghua flinches. He faces instead the great ice windows behind the throne, looking over the fortress and, behind it, the Northern Desert. "This Lord has been informed that the reason he cannot resurrect his Shizun is because Shizun has departed from this world," he says in a voice that grows low with frustration. "That he is *somewhere else* now. He cannot be found in any realms this Lord has access to. He is, therefore, in *another world."*

Shang Qinghua's breath hitches. "My Lord has this from a credible source?"

"Madam Meiyin is one of the strongest foretellers in the Demon Realm," Luo Binghe says grimly, glaring at the view outside.

"... She is, yeah," Shang Qinghua says under his breath and then, even quieter, "... Shit."

Luo Binghe looks at him over his shoulder. "Does Shishu know what she means?"

"... N-not exactly, no, but -" Shang Qinghua looks away, incredibly guilty, squirming with awkward unease. The warning is still there, inching ever closer. "He might've - read some things, yes -"

Luo Binghe turns to face him fully. With the desert and the snowy fortress behind him, bright with eternal winter, he's left in his own

shadow, and the only visible features in his face are his glowing red eyes - and the vicious demon mark on his forehead.

"What *things* has Shishu read?"

"Aiyah," the Peak Lord whimpers, caught between the Protagonist and the System and feeling the squeeze. "Nothing very recently, my Lord, I swear! It's only the words, transmigration of souls, are very familiar - where, may this one ask, where did Lord Luo hear of them?"

"They were spoken by Mobei-jun. He heard Shishu mention it," Luo Binghe says, his voice lowering to *gravel.* "What, exactly, does Shishu know?"

The System window sort of *shakes* at him, and Shang Qinghua despairs, lighting incense in his heart for himself and then for Cucumber-bro - who he will absolutely throw under the bus if it means he'll live to see another day.

Ah, Mobei-jun, his incredible perfect King, why did he have to be so -! If Shang Qinghua had realised Mobei-jun could actually *hear* him, he would've been more careful around him! Mobei-jun never reacted, never asked, never - ah!

"Shishu?" Luo Binghe growls and takes a step forward.

"This lowly servant doesn't know how it works," Shang Qinghua babbles, keeping a side eye on the System window. "Or what triggers it. Death, maybe! It's, the transmigration of souls is, like… like reincarnation, but sideways?"

"This Lord knows his Shizun hasn't reincarnated," Luo Binghe says very firmly.

Ahh, scary. "L-like this one said, sideways!" Shang Qinghua says feebly. "I-its not reincarnation, exactly. It's more like… possession?" Ahh, the System didn't like that at all! "This Shishu really can't say more, begging Lord Luo's pardon!"

It has already been too much.

Luo Binghe stares at him, and stares at him, and *stares at him* , and Shang Qinghua is going to see his gaze in his nightmares! "Shizun… Shizun is possessing someone…?"

Shang Qinghua backs away from the tendrils of demonic energy rising

from Luo Binghe. "Maybe! Not exactly! The previous host usually dies, haha," no, no, no, don't take his B-points, take Cucumber-bro's points, he's the one this is all about, and it's not like he needs them anymore!

Ahh, Luo Binghe is coming closer, this is the worst! "There's compatibility, kinda! I think!" Shang Qinghua babbles in panic. "The soul is attracted to a body that suits it! They always were *so alike,* really, it was so uncanny at times? So it's not really like possession, more like - like reoccupation?"

Luo Binghe's eyes sharpen - like cat's eyes, detecting prey. "... *what?"*

Fuck! Shang Qinghua puts his hands up against whatever is to come, but it doesn't come, neither from the System, nor the Demon Lord. Luo Binghe's eyes pass him by as he thinks, his gaze flicking to and fro as the half-demon searches his memories and flexes his intellect.

Both which Shang Qinghua knows are *considerable.*

"Shizun… isn't the original Shen Qingqiu, is he?" The Protagonist murmurs. "Shizun *changed.* This disciple remembers it well, when Shizun became kind, when Shizun became generous. And Shang-shishu knew," Luo Binghe says, and his gaze refocuses. "Shang-shishu knows Shizun was a result of the transmigration of souls. Shishu knows where Shizun comes from!"

"Aaahh," Shang Qinghua whimpers. "My Lord Luo -!"

Luo Binghe leans in and says, with absolute certainty. "Shishu will tell this Lord all he knows of Shizun. He will leave *nothing out."*

Shang Qinghua is going to *cry.* Please, System, have mercy on his soul - because Cucumber-bro would not!

41-43

"... So there's Natural Materia that grows and evolves and eventually spawns an offspring of exactly identical Materia that can then make the exact same journey - and then there's Artificial Materia that… doesn't?"

"You're really asking the wrong person - Genesis is the expert," Angeal sighs, rubbing at his forehead. "But yeah, that's basically it? Artificial Materia can still level up a bit, but it doesn't evolve or make a copy of itself."

Sephiroth nods, fascinated. "So Natural Materia basically does mitosis?"

"I… don't know what that is?" Angeal says, sounding lost.

They're walking through the forest, in between random encounters - following a wide old footpath towards the charcoal burner's house. The path has the signs of wheeled traffic where the dirt has really been compacted, but it was a while ago, and grasses have started taking real estate on the path. Still, it makes for easier walking than the wild, untamed forest.

"It's when something - a cell - splits into two identical copies," Sephiroth explains.

"Ah, then no, that's not exactly it - the offspring Materia is unleveled and undeveloped. It has to be matured anew," Angeal clarifies.

"Still. Eventually the offspring Materia becomes identical to the parent. It's asexual reproduction, at least," Sephiroth muses, fascinated by how *organic* it all sounds. Like Materia is actually a breed of organism doing what all living things do - eat and reproduce. And artificial versions are basically infertile! "I bet Artificial Materia still needs to be somehow seeded by the natural sort."

Angeal shrugs, helpless. "You'd really have better luck asking Genesis. Maybe you should send him a message, asking about it."

"Maybe I will," Sephiroth says, determined, and then looks up. "Heads up - bugs."

One random encounter later, they're back to walking.

"You know, you could actually just try using your Materia," Angeal comments. "Might give you some insight on how it works. Or do you not remember how?"

Sephiroth waves a hand. "You just push energy through the thing, it's not that hard."

"Then why not do it?"

Because MP is Qi, kinda, and using Materia basically burns it away. Or, well, transforms it. Part of it goes into the Materia being used, aiding its maturation, and the rest of it is transformed into whatever spell the Materia is for. It's very easy to use and very powerful and *incredibly energy inefficient.* And since Sephiroth still isn't sure whether he wants to take in ambient energy in the way of the locals, he isn't sure his MP actually replenishes? And sure, he could take an Ether, a potion that replenishes MP - but that's basically like *drinking raw Qi,* and the very idea is a bit alarming.

There's just a scary level of energy transference going on in this place, and his core is unstable enough!

Also Sephiroth would rather figure out how to consume the Materia itself, like you'd consume spirit stones - except he *really* doesn't need any extra Qi at this point.

"Maybe later," Sephiroth says and looks ahead for a distraction. "Oh, hey, is that the house?"

Angeal gives him a look, amused, but lets it go and looks ahead too.

The charcoal burner's house is built near to the side of a mountain wall, with three enormous charcoal kilns half carved into the stone of the mountain. The house is more of a homestead, with a large area cleared and fenced, with the house itself in the middle, a couple of storage huts, a stall, and a big shelter for wood.

It's a bit rundown, though. One of the storage houses has its rooftop caved in, and there's long grass growing everywhere. The charcoal kilns look not just cold, but like something had been nesting in one of them.

"That's strange," Angeal murmurs warily, looking around. "It…doesn't look like anyone's been living here for a good long while."

"Hmm," Sephiroth hums, crouching down to examine a footprint in the

dirt. It's fresh. "Someone has been here very recently, though." Someone in modern footwear - with treaded soles. Not that he knows what kind of footwear the people of Wutai favour, but, still…

Angeal looks at the footprint and hums. "Be on your guard. There's something weird going on in here."

Cautious, they examine the place and find no signs of any monster attacks. What they do find is more footprints, all by the same set of shoes, going strong in the place and by all appearances checking out the buildings.

"Looking for something, maybe?" Angeal murmurs as they consider the footprints.

"Hmm. I don't see any signs of monsters," Sephiroth comments. "Didn't the mission files say the place was already attacked? Maybe we're in the wrong place."

"Maybe…"

While Angeal checks their mission files and coordinates to confirm they're actually in the right house, Sephiroth tries to figure out why it was abandoned in the first place. It wasn't sudden, that he can tell - whoever lived here had the time to pack up. Everything that's left was put away very neatly, too.

"Well, this is the right place," Angeal says, following him inside. "Either they got the coordinates wrong - or the intelligence."

"I guess it could be a trap," Sephiroth muses, poking around the charcoal burner's old office in search of any paperwork. "If this is really where an informant once lived, maybe that informant turned into a double agent and set a trap."

"You really think so?" Angeal asks, sounding more interested than alarmed.

"Not really," Sephiroth shrugs and picks up a crumpled piece of paper, someone's attempt at a letter that had gotten ruined by an ink smear. Gently he spreads it out on the office table to read. "Or else it's a terrible trap…"

The letter is addressed to someone's uncle, informing them of the charcoal burner's good fortune. Apparently their family had been invited by the emperor to live and work in the capital. Lucky guy.

"Maybe we should prepare for an ambush, just in case," Angeal comments thoughtfully, adjusting his gloves. "What do you think?"

"I think they would've revealed themselves already, if it was the case," Sephiroth says. "And this is a terrible place for an ambush anyway. It's far too open."

"Well, good thing it's not an ambush!" a voice calls from the outside before Angeal can answer.

"... Sounds like something an ambusher would say," Angeal mutters, clearly recognizing the voice, and Sephiroth chuckles.

Reno waits for them outside, lazily scratching at a bug bite on his arm. "Congratulations, you have been summarily recruited for a secret Turk mission," he says and motions around them. "Your station."

"Turk mission?" Angeal repeats. "It was you who sent out that mission file?"

"Yep," Reno agrees, shrugging unrepentantly.

Sephiroth watches him warily. He'd not interacted with Reno or Rude much, Angeal had kinda covered for him there. He'd not entirely sure why the Turks followed them to Wutai. Maybe this is it.

Maybe this is as far as he gets, before having to commit, one way or the other.

Sephiroth braces himself. "What's the mission?"

Reno grins and points a finger at him. "Your mission, starting right now, is to stay here," he says, "And *get your shit together."*

The Turks have arranged everything. Sort of. The charcoal burner's house is long abandoned and remote, not close to any main routes, so it would be private. In the books, both Sephiroth and Angeal are taking part in a classified mission with the Turks, which has been approved by both the Director of the SOLDIER program and the Acting Director of the Turks. It would take someone higher up in the Public Security Department to delve deeper than that, and the President had already given his seal of approval, so there's not much Heidegger can do about it.

"And Rude is bringing everything we'll need to survive," Reno finishes. "Starting today, your priority is sorting out whatever is going on with you, free of distractions, external stressors and hopefully of further incidents."

Sephiroth still seems to be stuck on the *getting his shit together* part of the mission and apparently isn't sure whether to be insulted or not.

Angeal clears his throat. "And what are we supposed to… do, exactly?"

"Hell if I know," Reno shrugs and nods at Sephiroth. "Figure you'd sort it out by yourself, with your new spooky… whatever it is you got going on. You seem to have some idea."

"Uh," Sephiroth answers.

Eloquent.

Angeal runs a hand down his face. Then he laughs. "Okay, I have to admit. I'm impressed. I didn't really think you'd do anything, but - I'm impressed." And more than slightly intimidated by the connections and liberties the Turks have, but that's not exactly new. "How long do we have?"

"Until further notice, or until someone back in Midgar gets antsy," Reno shrugs. "I'm thinking maybe don't worry about time. If you need more, we will arrange some."

Huh. "This is really that important, then?"

Reno gives Sephiroth a look and then looks at Angeal. "Yeah," he says, a deceptively easy answer.

That's… somehow a little disconcerting. Certainly Sephiroth is invaluable to the program and to the company, but this… this is beyond VIP treatment.

"I see," Angeal murmurs and clears his throat.

Sephiroth finally shakes himself loose from his surprise, enough to look first somewhat sheepish - and then intrigued. "So, I can do whatever I want here?"

"Pretty much," Reno agrees, without any care for how alarming the question is. "And if you need something to further your *whatever* , we'll get it for you."

"Nice. And there will be no other missions if I don't want to do them right now?" Sephiroth asks.

"You can do them or not as you'd like - none of them have higher priority than this, and they can be delegated to other people, if it comes to that."

Sephiroth runs a hand over his chin. "And if I want access to some material that might be to some extent classified?"

Reno narrows his eyes. "Like what?"

"Haven't decided yet," Sephiroth answers flippantly. "But it might come up."

"... Great. We'll review case by case when we come to it," Reno mutters. "Though you know it's a bitch to get stuff shipped here, right? We're on another continent."

"Yes, yes, it's very impressive," Sephiroth says dismissively and thinks about something for a moment. Then he looks at the charcoal burner's house with a discerning eye. "And you'll be staying here too?" he then asks, glazing at Reno. "To watch us?"

Reno shrugs, unapologetic.

Sephiroth eyes him for a moment and then turns back to the house. "Very well. It will do."

"... Awesome," Reno says and motions. "Go, make yourselves comfortable or whatever. I'm going to walk the perimeter and set some traps."

"Mmhmm," Sephiroth answers, already striding back into the house with a proprietor's casual confidence, and Angeal can just imagine the furniture soon to be rearranged inside.

He hesitates before following and looks at Reno. "What is this really about? It's not just that Sephiroth lost control, is it?"

Reno considers him. "Well, duh, no," he says. "It's the stuff he's been saying in between."

And the abilities he seems to be on the verge of developing. "What's the official view on what's happening to Sephiroth?" What are they expecting from him?

"There isn't one," Reno says and arches his brows meaningfully, and then turns to go.

Angeal's face tightens, and he knows he probably doesn't understand the implications… but then maybe he does. All this effort and all the stuff that's been going on… whatever it is, the company is looking forward to benefiting from it greatly. And they want no one messing with what is happening before they do.

Angeal thinks of the moment Sephiroth *communed* with the old tree the day before, and for a moment he really wishes it was Genesis here with him instead. Genesis would actually know how to handle all of this. Angeal isn't even sure if he can ask Genesis about this, if he can talk to him about this!

Never mind the fact that Genesis probably has his hands full with whatever is happening back at Shinra Building… the aftermath of Sephiroth's incident and whatever Professor Hojo was doing…

Angeal turns to head inside.

… Where Sephiroth has begun poking around the house, and, of course, is already moving furniture around.

"I see you are all for this," Angeal comments.

"I'll take all the extra time I can get," Sephiroth mutters while carrying a little table to the middle of the main room. "Though I am not exactly happy about being under Turk supervision, I'll take it over the alternative."

Angeal hums, looking around and then deciding that Sephiroth probably doesn't need - or want - his help in decorating. "What's the alternative?"

Sephiroth grimaces and goes to move a bookshelf.

Okay then. Ominous. Angeal sighs and sets the Buster Sword down to lean against the wall near the door, right beside Masamune. "You know they expect something to come from this. For you to… to make it worth their while."

Sephiroth half laughs and half scoffs. "I just bet they do," he agrees and picks up somewhat dusty cushions and considers them with a frown.

Angeal folds his arms. "Are you going to?" he then asks, worried.

Sephiroth pauses and looks away, dropping the cushions by the table in the middle. "No," he says finally. "I don't imagine I will. Regardless," he shakes his head. "This is the next best thing to a full-on seclusion, and I am damn well going to make the most of it."

Angeal doesn't know what that means, but it doesn't matter. "Okay," he says and draws a breath. "Guess we'll… just stay here for the time being, then."

Sephiroth hums in agreement. "Guess so. Does it bother you?"

"No more than anything else around Wutai," Angeal admits and looks up at the ceiling. "We were already looking forward to a prolonged stay in someone's abandoned home. This place is honestly an improvement."

Sephiroth relaxes a little. "Yeah. And hey, the people here weren't chased out or killed by Shinra. That's something."

Angeal looks at him curiously. "How do you know that?"

"The original owner left a scrap piece of letter behind. Apparently they were invited to the capital," Sephiroth says.

… Sephiroth reads the Wutai language? Huh. Angeal didn't know that.

"I guess that's good to know," he says and then sighs. "Okay, so. This… *thing* you're doing. Your energy alignment stuff. Is there anything I can do to help? What do you need?"

Sephiroth hesitates between moving some jars around and looks at him. "I need a proper cleared training area," he says and offers him a wry smile. "At least as big as the training room back at Shinra Building."

"I can do that, yeah," Angeal says. "Anything else?"

Sephiroth thinks about it for a moment before setting the jars back down. "I'll let you know."

Angeal nods and gets to it. There's not much he can do when Sephiroth refuses to trust him, but… he'd do what he could.

Hopefully by the end of it, it would be enough.

"No, it was more like this? Legs bent more, and feet like this, yeah? I remember it because he corrected me on it, I had my foot aimed inside too much, and I wasn't in balance."

"Oh, yeah, yeah, he corrected me on that too…"

Kunsel looks between the two SOLDIERs, Second Class Keyes and Third Class Alme, both holding the same pose. "Okay, that's good, hold like that for a moment."

It had taken all his savings to buy a camera on short notice, especially one of the instant cameras, but it was well worth it. With it he managed to capture most of the Training Session second hand, photographing the other SOLDIERs doing what Sephiroth had taught them in that frantic session.

While the pictures develop, Kunsel takes out his notebook. "Okay, what did he say to you, exactly?"

The notebook is already full of quotes and lines from Sephiroth, some of them verified by other SOLDIERs word for word, others contested. The information and the pictures would soon be gathered into one easily distributable leaflet - already, most everyone he'd talked to wanted copies.

"When do you think it will be ready?" Alme asks eagerly.

"I think I got around to everyone - just James and Zadrian left," Kunsel says, adding final notes to the quotes. "They're out on a mission. I'll throw together a mock-up once I've gotten around to them."

"Let me know when, I'll proofread it for you."

"Will do," Kunsel says.

"Heads up," Keyes says. "It's the last batch."

Kunsel looks up to see the three SOLDIERs, the most recent ones to have been called into the labs, heading towards the lounge area. "Hey guys. Everything good?"

"I failed my affinity test," the youngest says while the others shrug uncomfortably. "I don't know if that's good or bad."

"Yeah," another one of them says, looking worried. "Does this mean we can't become Seconds?"

"No, no, the tests are for something else," Kunsel says reassuringly. "Some new thing they're trying. Everyone's going through them, and I don't think they will affect regular injections."

"Sunder passed the test, and he's having a *time,"* Alme comments. "So I think you maybe got lucky."

"Oh, okay," the other Third looks a bit uneasy. "Um. I'm going to head out, I really need a shower. I'll see you guys later."

"Yeah," the quiet one agrees, and they head off together. The Third Class that spoke first waves them off but sticks around, looking worried.

Kunsel hums and glances at Alme. "What's going on with Sunder?"

"I don't know, but they've barely let him out of the labs," Alme says, a bit uncomfortable. "There are all these injections, and they want to keep him under observation for every one. Raiton and Decker are in there too."

"And a bunch of cadets," Keyes adds.

They're all quiet for a moment, uncomfortably aware of the fact that a lot of cadets are *way* below the usual recruitment age, because the SOLDIER program doesn't *have* a recruitment age, and trying for SOLDIER is an easy way to get to Infantry early.

"I guess whatever they're looking for, it's easier to get before SOLDIER Mako injections?" Keyes mutters.

"Or they just have a bigger pool of candidates," Kunsel agrees.

The youngest SOLDIER in their little circle looks confused. "Shouldn't that be a good thing? Aren't they coming up with, like, improvements to the program? Maybe the cadets will get better injections than we will."

There's another uncomfortable silence. "Maybe," Kunsel says slowly.

The rumours of Sephiroth going all glowy before the Incident have been going through the SOLDIER floors, and it's not exactly a secret that it was something new and incredible. The fact that the Science

Department is taking bigger interest in the SOLDIER program all of a sudden is without question related.

And there's the rumour of Sephiroth having been given an extra large dose of Mako just before the Incident. Everyone knows Sephiroth's Mako injections are the highest in the program. For anyone else, they'd just give them Mako Poisoning. If the Science Department is trying to recreate what happened to Sephiroth…

That's not something you can just *talk about* though.

"Genesis isn't happy about it," Keyes points out.

"The Crimson Commander?" the young SOLDIER asks excitedly. "Why not?"

"Well. Because. Uh." Keyes throws a helpless look at Kunsel.

"He's just worried the Science Department is getting a bit…" presumptuous and careless and injection-happy, never a good thing for the SOLDIER program, "... overzealous with their… improvements."

"Aren't improvements a good thing, though?"

Clearly the kid has never heard of the early days - when some SOLDIERs developed Mako stones in their insides. Or the ones that *had to be put down.* "We just hope they take some caution," Kunsel says awkwardly in face of the kid's confusion. "Mako isn't something you should throw around willy-nilly."

"... But isn't that what Shinra is all about?"

Kunsel laughs, and he's not the only one. "Ain't that the truth," Keyes says and claps the kid on the shoulder. "I gotta go get some sleep - I've got a night mission coming up. You got everything you needed, Kunsel?"

"Yeah, thanks. Good luck on your mission."

The SOLDIERs disperse, aside from the youngest, who stands there, still confused, scratching at the back of his head.

"I don't get it," the young Third Class says. "Did I say something funny?"

"Kinda," Kunsel admits with a smile. "Don't worry about it. You're

pretty new, huh? Part of the last group that passed the candidate process?"

"Yeah! My name's Zack," the kid says and offers his hand. "Zack Fair. Nice to meetcha, sir!"

"Just call me Kunsel." They shake hands. "Are you getting the hang of everything alright?"

"It's been a bit weird lately, but yeah," the new Third Class says. "Mostly me and the others have been running around in the slums, taking out monsters."

That's what most Thirds do, yeah. "And how is that going?"

"Eh, I guess it's fine?" Zack shrugs. "I mean, we were given swords and stuff, and it's not like the beasties down there are much of a challenge. I come from Gongaga, and lemme tell you - after Touch Mes, everything else is easy."

Kunsel blinks at that declaration and then snorts. "Touch Mes - you mean the… frogs?"

Zack gives him a disgruntled look. "You don't know what they do, do you?"

"Well, I've heard about them…"

"They put you to sleep and then you wake up as a frog," Zack says. "They are a menace and the worst thing you will ever fight."

Kunsel laughs. "I guess you're well prepared for SOLDIER then, having already gone through the worst."

Zack grins and then gives him a curious look. "So, uh, why were you taking pictures before? Was it for some kind of magazine?"

Kunsel looks down at his notebook. The pictures have finished developing, showing Alme and Keyes striking poses. "Kinda - it's for a tutorial I'm putting together. You wanna take a look?"

44-46

Observation log, 8th of October, 16:34.

Sephiroth spent most of the day redecorating the house before fixing up the yard to his liking. He's pretty particular about where everything goes. Hewley's fixed up a training field for him, and bedrooms for all of us. No idea who will be cooking. At a guess, it's not going to be either one of the SOLDIERs.

After poking around the house, they set up to practise outside. No sign of any usual energy activity from Sephiroth so far - just normal sword practice. Sephiroth seems to be teaching Hewley how to actually use his huge ass sword.

Seems like a good teacher.

Observation log, 8th of October, 18:45

Sword practice finished, no new developments to report. Sephiroth is teaching Hewley how to meditate. Apparently it's "good for your energies" to meditate after practice.

Rude finally decided to show up with our supplies. No fucking wonder it took him forever - the dumbass hauled the whole load in with a handcart. Still, got everything here alright, so, gotta hand it to him, man doesn't quit easy.

I guess I'm cooking tonight. Hope everyone likes chili!

Observation log, 8th of October, 21:13

Sephiroth is reading through all the writing left behind by the previous owner of the safehouse. I would like to note that there's no mention of him knowing Wutai language *anywhere* in his file. Hewley is checking the perimeter. Rude passed out after eating.

Chili was universally enjoyed by all! This ends the 8th of October log.

Observation log, 9th of October, 10:05

Well. It's safe to say that energy alignment work has begun.

After breakfast Sephiroth informed us that he'd be going to the training field and that he shouldn't be disturbed for any reason - that

we're free to watch, but that's it, and even if his practice runs past dinner time, that was fine. Just let him do his thing.

The implication that if we got in his way, we'd go the way of the SOLDIER training room, was pretty clear.

He's been working on sword forms ever since, going on for three hours now. It doesn't look that different from the usual sword practice he does - but it *feels* different. Even before he started glowing. It feels like when someone is firing off a spell, that rushing, on fire, kinda electric feeling? It feels like that, like Sephiroth's firing off spells every which way, just, nonstop. But he isn't.

Hewley looks kinda like someone hit him over the head with a crowbar, so whatever he's sensing with his SOLDIER enhancements must be pretty wild.

Observation log, 9th of October, 13:45

Energy alignment is still going, with no change and no visible signs of exhaustion from Sephiroth.

Asked Hewley over lunch what he thought of the whole thing and what the alignment practice felt like to him.

Hewley: "Have you ever seen a natural Mako spring? I'm originally from the Mideel Islands, and there's a bunch of them - and the really old and active ones tend to have a buildup of Materia around them. They feel like nothing else - people use them for all kinds of health benefits."

Rude: "Sephiroth feels like a… healing spring?"

Hewley: "Kind of. One with a whirlpool in the middle… and maybe a thunderstorm looming overhead."

Observation log, 9th of October, 17:30

Sephiroth is still at it. He hasn't even taken a break to piss!

Observation log, 9th of October, 19:15

Sephiroth stopped the sword practice, finally, but it doesn't feel like it's over. He's still glowing, and now he's sitting in the middle of the field, meditating. He has one hand on his stomach, and Hewley is worried about another blood vomiting possibility. Like maybe what

he's doing is making *physical changes to his insides.* Which is just such a lovely thought just before dinner!

We've decided not to disturb him - but Rude's making a plate for him, just in case he'll be done soon.

Observation log, 9th of October, 21:15

Sephiroth is still meditating. Guess that means seconds for the rest of us!

Observation log, 9th of October, 23:50

When is this asshole going to go to bed?!

Observation log, 10th of October, 02:05

Fucking finally! Sephiroth finally stopped, got up, had a wash and went to bed. This concludes the log for the 9th of October. Goddamn.

Observation log, 10th of October, 10:40

It's hard to say what, if anything, the previous day actually achieved. Sephiroth doesn't look or feel different, and he still acts the same. Reno can't tell if there's any difference either. He seems just as weird as before.

Hewley grilled him on the whole thing, but Sephiroth wasn't exactly forthcoming.

Exact transcript of Sephiroth's and Hewley's discussion:

Sephiroth: "Can you feel the MP inside you? I don't mean just when you use it, or when you're running low - everyone becomes more aware of the volume of their blood when they have anaemia, that's not what I mean. I mean right now - can you feel the MP you have? How about the Mako?"

Hewley: "I guess, sort of? I mean, I do feel different than I did before I had any treatments, and I know I have MP, but that's probably not what you mean?"

Sephiroth: "No, not exactly. I guess it doesn't actually matter."

Hewley: "Hey, no, you got me curious now. What does it feel like for you?"

Sephiroth: "It's like I have a concrete *lump* of… crude energy in my gut."

Hewley: "Crude?"

Sephiroth. "Raw, unprocessed, unrefined."

Hewley: "That's the Mako inside you?"

Sephiroth: "That too."

Hewley: "And with your energy alignment practice, you're… refining that?"

Sephiroth: "Something like it."

Hewley: "That's incredible. What will happen if you succeed?"

Sephiroth: "... Guess we'll see once I do."

Observer's note, I don't know what the hell that means, but the look on his face was fucking scary. Sephiroth knows *exactly* what it means. And he knows it will have some consequences going forward. And he definitely expects those consequences to be mostly bad. But he's still doing it!

So here's a question; does Sephiroth himself know why he's doing what he's doing? Does he have a plan, is this part of some scheme - or is he blindly following impulses he probably doesn't fully understand?

Sephiroth went back to work immediately after eating breakfast, and it looks like it's going to be another 12 hours of glowy sword swinging.

I should've brought a magazine or something.

"All these treatments, all these new *experiments* - and you leave me out? All that awaits me is a sombre morrow… is it?"

Genesis' words are light and flippant, but his eyes are hard as he stares at the scientist before him. It's not the first time he's made the observation.

Doctor Hollander looks away, uncaring, leafing through his files.

"Professor Hojo's recent project has to do with S type SOLDIERs. You are type G. The treatments he's planning aren't compatible."

"Whyever not?" Genesis asks as though offended, leaning back slightly and crossing one leg over the other. They're alone in the examination room, and Hollander has always been weirdly lenient to him, which he is fully taking advantage of, trying to press for answers. "We get the same Mako treatments, do we not? The same power that lights your lamps and moves your machinery flows through our veins."

"The infusion method is different," Hollander says dismissively.

"Injection is an injection."

"You know it's not that simple," Hollander says, giving him a look. "Human body in its natural state can't easily integrate Mako - it needs a carrier. Type S and Type G differ in the nature of that carrier. It's impossible to mix the methods."

Genesis shrugs at that. "And yet we all come out just about the same." The SOLDIER *types* are one of the many mysteries of the program. There's twice as many S types as there are G types, and as far as anyone can tell, there's not that much of a difference, when it comes to abilities.

Sephiroth is type S, of course, and it had taken no time at all to figure out that the SOLDIERs that had been hijacked by Hojo's new project were also S types.

"Even if you can't see the differences, rest assured, they exist," Hollander says. "Professor Hojo's methods work for S types only."

"And what of us poor lowly G types, then? S types get this attention, all these new treatments, and we're left in the dust? How tragic," Genesis says exaggeratedly, making a face. "Aren't you the manager of us G types? Don't you care about us?"

Hollander glances at him with an unamused look and lowers the writing pad. "You're better off. What Hojo is doing has already led to five cases of Mako poisoning," he scoffs. "And two casualties. It's never going to work."

Two casualties? Those hadn't been reported. "Such trust in your own Department Head, Doctor?" Genesis asks, swallowing his demands for answers. "Maybe there's something you don't know. After all, professor Hojo is putting in all this effort! What he is trying to achieve must be

very important."

"Che," Hollander answers. "You don't have to worry about that."

"Oh, I'm not worried," Genesis says. He's *furious* and mentally going through the list of all the names of the SOLDIERs that had vanished into the Science floors and trying to figure out who they haven't heard anything from. It could have been cadets, a lot of those had ended up in the labs, but Hollander said *casualties*…

"Really?" Hollander asks dubiously. "Then why are you asking?"

"Why, I'm *intrigued, Doctor"* Genesis says exaggeratedly. "We all want to get stronger, don't we? Professor Hojo is a genius, so surely whatever he has in mind is going to be a great improvement to the program. We're *all* holding our breaths to see the results."

It hits Hollander right where he feels it - in the ego. "Well, you shouldn't be!" the doctor snaps. "Hojo hasn't any idea what he's doing! He's just trying to copy the work of his betters!"

Genesis leans back as though shocked. "But who could be better than the *famous* Professor Hojo?" Because it sure as hell isn't Hollander.

Hollander seems to sense the sentiment because he gives Genesis a scoff. "Gast Faremis," he says and looks away, shaking his head. "Not that it matters anymore. Never mind these new treatments, Genesis, they have nothing to do with you. Hojo will do what he always does, and there will be a cleanup after, and that's that."

"So, there were other tests like these?" Genesis asks. "Oh no, I must've missed them."

Hollander laughs at that, bitterly. "Every couple of years Hojo gets an *idea,* the company pours money into it, and eventually Turks wipe the slate clean. That man hasn't had an original idea since - che," he mutters and waves a dismissive hand at Genesis. "Your scans are clean, you're fine! Get out of here, I have work to do!"

Genesis doesn't move. "And what if Professor Hojo succeeds? Will type S SOLDIERs become stronger than us type Gs? Should we be worried?"

"Only of more incidents like at the training room!" Hollander says. "Do not get into your head any ideas about getting extra Mako either! Your doses are calibrated to your physiology, anything more might lead to setbacks!"

"Professor Hojo doesn't seem to care about those," Genesis comments.

Hollander harrumphs at that. "The only thing Hojo cares about is his own achievements. And I *do* care about you."

Genesis' leans back from that frankly unappealing statement. "Much obliged, Doctor," he mutters.

"I know you don't think much of it, but I do care," Hollander says, eyeballing him unhappily. "You and Angeal both. Have you heard from him?"

Ugh. Him and Angeal, sure, they're the famous ones - but what about the rest of their men? "He and Sephiroth are just fine in Wutai," Genesis says, standing up from the examination table where he'd been sitting. For all that Hollander is good for answers, the man is still unpleasant, and he's not exactly interested in chitchat with him. "And it doesn't seem they'll be back anytime soon."

Hollander looks unhappy with that. "Angeal is more than Sephiroth's babysitter," he mutters.

Angeal is lucky he isn't in Midgar right now - what's going on in the SOLDIER program would be driving him out of his honourable mind. "Take it up with Lazard," Genesis says and strides out of the examination room.

Though mostly a waste of time, it did confirm that some of the people taken in wouldn't ever be coming out. He knew about the Mako poisonings, the increased doses, the mysterious injections, the guys stuck in the Mako infusion chambers, but not the deaths. He'd suspected, but… now he knows for sure. All that's left is figuring out who.

Not that it would make a difference.

No one in the Science Department would be doing anything for their sake, not even Hollander. They would just let Hojo run rampant through the program doing whatever he wanted, until… until what, until he got results? No one even knows what the man is trying to accomplish, aside from *creation of a second Sephiroth!* And how many SOLDIERs would he poison along the way?

Genesis takes a long, slow breath.

Asking questions isn't getting him anywhere. He needs to get someone

into the labs and see what the hell is actually going on in there. Though he's questioned everyone who's gone in and most everyone is on his side, it's not enough. The Scientists of Shinra Science Department are too careful around SOLDIER members.

What he needs is someone they might not be as careful with. Someone who is less dangerous and more expendable.

What he needs is a cadet.

Observation log, 11th of October, 12:00

07:05 Sephiroth wakes up.

07:34 Sephiroth eats a breakfast of porridge, canned apples and orange juice. Meal detailed in attachment E.

07:57 Sephiroth begins preparing for Energy Alignment with warmups and stretches, detailed in full in attachment D.

08:15 Sephiroth begins sword practice.

08:42 Sephiroth begins Energy Alignment. Energy output matches previous sessions visually. Movements and forms same as ones detailed in attachment C.

20:15 Sephiroth finishes sword forms and moves onto meditation. Visual concentration of light and energy in his cupped palms, no indication as to its nature or purpose, but likely a progression of Energy Alignment.

22:32 Sephiroth finishes Energy Alignment and begins preparations for bed.

Observation notes: Sephiroth only ate one meal today, with nowhere near enough kilojoules to support the level of physical activity he is practising - nor is he drinking enough water. Sephiroth shows no visual sign of exhaustion, starvation, or dehydration. Will continue to observe.

Addendum to observation log for the 11th of October: checking perimeter showed no sign of local activity. Angeal Hewley ventured out at 11:27 to hunt monsters and returned at 15:56. Reno is getting agitated.

End log for the 11th of October.

Observation log, 12th of October, 12:00

07:20 Sephiroth wakes up.

07:51 Sephiroth eats breakfast of rice, eggs, canned apples and tea. Meal detailed in attachment E.

08:20 Sephiroth begins previously mentioned warmups and stretches. He is joined by Hewley. They move on to a session of Buster Sword Lessons, detailed in attachment F.

09:34 Sephiroth begins going through his usual sword forms. Angeal Hewley moves to train by himself in the inner yard.

10:12 Sephiroth enters the Energy Alignment phase of training. No visual change in forms or energy output. In fact, forms are starting to look like they come in an established pattern.

15:23 Sephiroth finishes sword forms (notably early) and moves onto meditation. No visual concentration of energy observed this time.

15:54 Sephiroth finishes meditation and goes looking for Angeal Hewley, who is, at the time, examining the Charcoal Burner's House's old vegetable garden.

16:00, est. Dialogue:

Sephiroth: "Hey, what are you up to?"

Angeal Hewley: "Just checking to see if there's anything edible here - canned food is going to get really tiresome in the long run. What's up, it's everything alright?"

Sephiroth: "No, no. I'm just - getting a bit lost in my own head."

Hewley: "Do you want to talk about it?"

Sephiroth: "No, I want a bit of - I need a distraction, for a bit."

Hewley: "... Okay? Do you want to go hunt monsters, do you want to spar, or…?"

Sephiroth: "I think if I spent another moment thinking about physical cultivation I might lose it. So. No. Something else."

Hewley: "Uh?"

Sephiroth: "You know when you work on something for so long that it starts losing all meaning? Like, a report, maybe? Stare at it long enough, and it turns into nonsense. I need, you know. A break."

Hewley: "Ah, yeah, okay, I get what you mean. Yeah, I can take a break with you. What do you want to do?"

Sephiroth: "I have no idea. Just something else."

Hewley: "I'm sure we can figure something out."

16:00-18:00, est. Sephiroth and Angeal Hewley proceed to explore the Charcoal Burner's House's abandoned stores and discover an old, broken set of something called Weiqi. Sephiroth proceeds to teach Angeal Hewley how it was played.

18:15 Dialogue

Hewley: "Now, I don't want to sound impatient, but, this energy alignment stuff. How long is it going to take?"

Sephiroth: "Normally decades."

Hewley: "Decades?!"

Sephiroth: "Most of it is just energy gathering, that usually takes most of the time. I don't exactly have that issue. If anything, I have too much."

Hewley: "Oh. Right. Um, then, how long do you think it will take for you to sort it out?"

Sephiroth: "I've gotten things moving. If my veins can take it… maybe another week?"

Hewley: "That's not too bad, though… what do you mean *if your veins can take it?"*

Sephiroth: "... Have you figured out where MP resides in your body yet?"

Hewley: "Um, no? I mean, I know it's there and I can sort of feel it there, but it's not really in any specific location."

Sephiroth: "Hm. Keep trying."

Hewley: "Sure, I'll try. I'm not sure what you're after, though."

Sephiroth: "You'll know it when you feel it."

19:12 Sephiroth fills the tub in the back room and has a full bath.

20:07 Sephiroth eats a dinner of pasta, canned pickles, canned peas, crackers and apple juice. Meal detailed in attachment E.

20:24 Sephiroth turns in early.

Observation notes: Sephiroth ate two full meals and seems to have taken in enough nutrients for his daily requirements. It should be noted, however, that his level of physical activity was greatly diminished today. It should also be noted that between the training session and the later board games he seemed rather distracted. He might be procrastinating on his progress, perhaps having some sort of block? If faster results are desired, it might be advisable to remove Hewley from the situation.

Addendum to observation log for the 12th of October: Reno reports signs of activity in the forest - a smoke trail approximately 15 kilometres away. It is possible that our occupation has been noticed by Wutai troops. We are increasing our level of alert and redoing our traps. Though with two SOLDIER First Class present we have little to fear from any kind of Wutai assault, a surprise attack at an inopportune moment might be disastrous. Reno will be heading out to investigate at first light tomorrow.

End log for the 12th of October.

Observation log, 13th of October, 12:00

07:11 Sephiroth wakes up.

07:36 Sephiroth eats breakfast of porridge, canned apples and tea. Meal detailed in attachment E.

08:02 Sephiroth and Angeal Hewley proceed to meditate together in the main room of the house. Sephiroth is talking through the entire process, guiding Hewley every step of the way. No visual energy fluctuations to observe.

09:12 Sephiroth and Angeal Hewley proceed with sword practice, with Sephiroth instructing.

10:35 Sephiroth and Hewley separate and Sephiroth proceeds with his sword forms in the usual manner.

10:54 Sephiroth enters the Energy Alignment phase. The forms seem to have settled into an established pattern. No other changes to the overall practice to be observed.

11:30 Reno returns and confirms there's Wutai troops making their way towards our location. With Sephiroth in the Energy Alignment phase, it's deemed unsafe to disturb him with the news. Hewley offers to take care of the enemy troops.

11:43 Hewley sets out to meet the Wutai troops. I will check the perimeter while Reno keeps watch on Sephiroth.

12:11 Perimeter secure, traps primed. Should the worst come to pass and Sephiroth goes into misalignment, we will proceed according to plan.

12:15 Sending the WIP log to Tseng, just in case.

47

You want to be a hero.

You grow up with news that, unbeknownst to your young self, are completely controlled by Shinra, publicising Shinra propaganda, showing scenes of a war that's been going on for longer than you've known how to read. Everyone knows what the war is really about and everyone talks about it, but their tone is defeatist. There's nothing anyone can do about it. It's Shinra. Shinra will do as it likes. Ultimately, few people in your little backwater town really care.

But you don't really understand. You've seen the pictures - the parades, the speeches, the tech showcases. Tanks and trucks and planes and helicopters and the great airships. Shinra technology is already like magic to you - but they also make magic, they *make* Materia!

And they make SOLDIER.

The SOLDIERs are in the papers a lot. Sephiroth is in the papers a lot.

They call him a hero. The Hero of Shinra, the Hero of Wutai. Your mother reads you the article about him saving a squad of infantry troopers all by himself, how he'd taken a town just with his sword, how a great general surrendered to Sephiroth personally. There is a magazine every other week with Sephiroth on the front page.

Everyone is in awe of Sephiroth. All the kids in the school talk about how cool he is. They trade pictures of him like they're old-fashioned reading cards - until Shinra actually starts making SOLDIER trading cards. Everyone wants the holographic one of Sephiroth with Masamune.

Everyone wants to be like Sephiroth.

They talk about SOLDIERs. How they're superhuman. How Shinra puts magic into their veins, making them like the Ancients of myth and legend - but better! Because SOLDIERs can't just do magic - they're also really strong and really fast, and nothing can stand in their way! SOLDIERs are the best of the best! Their eyes glow and they can lift cars and fight dragons, and just being a SOLDIER means you're a hero.

Because heroes are people in the news, making headlines and having

their pictures taken.

And you want to be a hero.

You want to be respected and acknowledged and *feared* . You want to know that there's nobody out there who can push you around. You want to make it into the newspapers, you want to be the one they write and talk about. You want to be the person they look up to and say, "Wow, I wanna be like them."

So you look into it. How do people become SOLDIER? They go to Midgar, they enter the SOLDIER candidate trials. There are tests, though no one knows for sure what they are. If you pass them, there's some kind of special surgery, and then…then you're in. And they make you into a SOLDIER.

And you're a hero for the rest of your life.

So you leave home. You make it all the way across the Planet and to Midgar. You sleep in an inn that costs too much, and you go to Shinra Building, and you ask the ladies at the reception, "How do I apply for the SOLDIER candidate trials?"

They laugh, and they give you a form to fill, which you pretend to read, but you don't, really, you're too excited. You sign everything, and they tell you, "Come back in two weeks, that's when the trials start."

In two weeks you use up all your savings and see the best Midgar has to offer, and you're sick with nerves and starting to worry, and you know you should call your mom, but you can't, not until you have good news. You're really starting to be nervous, but then, finally, it's time.

You head to the Shinra Building. You see the lobby is full of kids just like you, all nervous and sick and excited, and, you can't help noticing, so much bigger than you. Maybe older than you. SOLDIER candidate trials don't have an age limit, but you're worried you might be the youngest one there.

You don't talk to anybody. You're worried you'll throw up, you're so anxious.

A doctor welcomes you all into the SOLDIER candidate trials. He explains: there are several steps to becoming a SOLDIER, and the very first of it is the Mako reactivity test, and that there's no point in telling

you about the rest unless you pass it. After all, you can't become a SOLDIER at all if you can't handle Mako! Everyone laughs, nervously. Your forced chuckle sounds like a wheeze. You wish you'd gone to the bathroom before it all started.

They divide the candidates into groups of twelve, and you're in group 8. Each group is assigned a lab, and a man in a lab coat tells you to follow. You take the elevator up. One of the other candidates looks at you and snorts. You're the shortest in the group.

You feel yourself blush, but say nothing.

Your group is ushered into a lab and lined up by size. The tech pulls up a trolley with twelve syringes and a number of swabs. You're the last in line - the biggest goes first.

You watch each glowing green injection closely - you see every reaction.

The first candidate goes pale and begins to sweat. He's told to sit down.

The second candidate doesn't react at all. He's told to sit down.

Third breaks out into red bumps all over his arm and is quickly given another injection. He's the first one to fail.

Fourth candidate reacts like the first and sits down.

Fifth passes out - he's the second one to fail.

Sixth doesn't react and is told to sit down…

Until finally it's your turn.

You watch the needle go in. It hurts. It feels weird, when the lab technician begins pushing the glowing green liquid in. You can't figure out how it feels. It just feels like a lot.

You feel pressure, inside yourself and in your head and all around you. You feel like you're being squeezed from inside out. You feel like you're suddenly very heavy, and yet you also feel light as a feather. The lights in the lab suddenly seem to glow blindingly bright.

You're drenched in sweat.

The lab technician tells you to sit down.

You pass the test - the eight of twelve. Of the four that failed, two have to be rolled out in wheelchairs. Of the eight that passed, two have thrown up.

They tell you you have higher Mako reactivity than is really desired in the program. There's a good chance you - along with numbers one, four and nine who reacted like you did - wouldn't pass the follow-up tests. You're told to not get your hopes up - but also that you shouldn't let that get you down.

"There's another program running right now," they tell you, cheerfully. "They're looking for volunteers for a new type of SOLDIER treatments! You might be a perfect fit for it!"

You don't understand. The pressure inside your head is turning into a headache. You try to reply cheerfully and probably fail.

The next stage of testing would be in a week. They tell you to be back then and send you off.

You're not sure what you're going to do. You've run out of money and can't stay at the inn anymore. You have nowhere to stay and you know no one in Midgar. Your head is starting to really hurt, and the injection site is inflamed. You don't know what you're going to do for another week. The pressure inside your head feels *permanent*.

You think you might've messed up, bad.

But you still want to be a hero.

48-50

His Qi is beginning to spin.

It feels incredible. The flow is sluggish, the mass of energy is still so solid that it feels like he's working with a slurry of concrete - but there's a current. With each session, it gets easier.

With each session, it spins longer on its own.

He's never felt an achievement like it. Like, sure, he *knows* cultivation, he'd even *advanced* in cultivation. He'd worked really hard! He'd taken Shen Qingqiu's core almost to a new level before the Without a Cure Poison! He knows how it's done and has been doing it for years.

But the thing is, he'd never actually *earned* Shen Qingqiu's cultivation prowess. It came ready-made for the most part, with the majority of the hard work completed decades ago. He'd inherited an Immortal Master's Core, and he'd just brushed it off and carried on, and even though he'd made it work, it… wasn't really his.

And true enough, neither is this, not entirely. He's skipping at a minimum a *decade* of Qi-condensation work here thanks to Mako and MP and EXP and all that. He got one hell of a head start here! But then, everyone in SOLDIER did, and the current inside him, this development in that near solid mass of energy - that's *all* him.

He's cultivating a Golden Core! And it's all him. And goddamn, it feels *so good.* Like a giddy adrenaline burst with serotonin and dopamine and *I kinda wanna jump around and dance and spin* good. Happiness very literally incarnates in a beautiful glowing core.

He's not quite there yet, it's still like trying to spin a boulder the size of a house, but he's getting there, he's almost gotten it to shape, it's almost spinning under its own weight, it's *so close* that he can almost taste it.

Just a little bit more…

Sephiroth moves from form to form, feeling the flow of energy circulate in his meridians, smoother by the moment. His spiritual veins are still scarred all the way to hell, but he's gotten them to yield, and the snags have opened up - the flow is easier now. With time and with careful cultivation, he'd be able to slowly heal them. With

Sephiroth's natural healing aided by the magic of cultivation… and *actual* magic to boot…!

Ah, he's really making something incredible here!

It's pretty much inevitable that something comes along to put a spanner into the works.

It's Rude, coming to stand next to the training field. Sephiroth can't feel Angeal anywhere near. Reno is out of his reach too. And Rude feels… anxious.

Sephiroth searches the surroundings with his slowly sharpening spiritual senses and then begins pulling his cultivation in, as fast as he can without causing issues. He compresses his core, constricts the flow to safer levels and finishes his set by *pulling* it all inward. His core carries on with the momentum he's given it and keeps spinning.

Rude is standing at the very edge of the training field, not even trying to hide for once.

"What's wrong?" Sephiroth asks, pulling his sword into a brief salute before sheathing it. "Where are the others?"

Rude is quiet for a moment, taking him in carefully. Then he relaxes. "There is a Wutai troop movement in the forest. Reno confirmed they're heading this way," he explains and then, "Hewley has gone to meet them head on."

… Ah, shit. There it is! Plot, coming to get him! Guess things had been a bit too easy and nice. Okay, he probably should've expected this, what with it being warfront and everything, but still! Fuuck.

Sephiroth draws a breath and braces himself. "Which way?"

Rude hesitates. "It's unlikely that your intervention is necessary. SOLDIER of Hewley's level can handle Wutai troops."

Most likely, yes! But Sephiroth isn't sure he could handle the idea of Angeal just… killing people?! Even if it is the way it is and even if it is what they usually do. Who knows how many people they've already killed in Shinra's name! Going by his mission listings, the Shinra standard mode of operation is *kill first, ask questions never*… probably very often! If that's how Angeal handles things too, then…

"I didn't ask whether it was *necessary,"* Sephiroth points out sharply. "I

asked *which way?"*

"... North," Rude finally admits, and Sephiroth detects no lies in his tone or body language. The guy seems a bit resigned.

Nodding, Sephiroth searches the area north with his senses, and then - then he takes off.

He *really* takes off.

It might not be sword flight, but man, SOLDIER are really something else when it comes up to speed! Even with Sephiroth's stupid long legs and their ridiculous muscles, the way he just *eats the distance* is incredible! From the outside it must look like he just vanished, anime style. Just blink, and Sephiroth's *gone!*

Ah, pity he can't see it from outside.

Not the time, though. Superhuman speed or not, it's really awkward, navigating the forest - there's no handy-dandy road to follow northward, just bushes and trees and uneven ground. And smacking into a tree at this speed really doesn't appeal to him!

Hmm. Actually. Didn't Sephiroth fly around, like, *a lot* in the original game? He remembers it because, one, seeing the low poly model fly seriously towards the camera had made him laugh his ass off, and two, because seeing it sent him down a rabbit hole of trying to figure out whether there were Qigong aspects in Final Fantasy VII. He never got a definite answer to that, but… Sephiroth definitely flew around. And so did Genesis and Angeal, on wings that should've never been able to support their weight!

And he's already proven that cultivation *works* here… so, *maybe…?*

Sephiroth flexes his still imperfect core and pulses his still sluggish QI and spreads out his arms, Masamune in one hand, and *jumps.* His momentum sends him forward a bit more than intended, but he gets into the air. He gets up high indeed - and almost smacks right into a tree for his efforts.

With one foot he pushes off it, and he keeps *going up,* near weightless, carried on by his Qi. And it's.

Woah.

PIDW was, despite all its Xianxia themes of Demons and different

Realms and Immortal Cultivators, more Wuxia when it came to combat. Sure there were spells and Qi attacks - and really, *really* elaborate sword formations for a story that didn't really do teamwork all that much! But while there was sword flight, there wasn't your usual weightlessness and gliding and jumping around from wire-thin branches, light as a feather.

Shen Yuan had been convinced it was just because Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky wanted to write a million scenes of sword flight make out, and that didn't work so well if everyone could fly around willy-nilly, now did it? No, just take away the heroine's sword and make Bingge fly them around, and boom, perfect excuse for mid air PDA! He didn't mind reading it - sword flight was pretty cool and lack of weightlessness made fights more grounded overall.

Heh, grounded.

Living in PIDW with a disability that made sword flight kinda risky though, ah. A bit of weightlessness in the way of most Wuxia heroes everywhere would've made it much easier, just getting around in Cang Qiong Mountain! Alas, he had to walk instead. What a waste of time.

Well, apparently there are no such limitations here! And *of course* Qigong flight comes easily for Sephiroth. Of course it does!

Sephiroth flies his way to the highest tree tops and over them, jumping from the highest branches as the distance simply disappears beneath him. He's weightless and strong, and not even gravity can touch him!

Ahh, there's really nothing like cultivating a Golden Core!

One Wingless Angel, coming through!

There are certain things you can expect to happen when warriors from opposing factions meet. Some of those things don't make it into the reports.

Truth rarely accepted by higher-ups at Shinra is that no one wants to die. It would be obvious to anyone with sense, but it isn't. Because even when they acknowledge that, sure, no one wants to die, they rarely draw the next conclusion. Which is that no one willingly charges into a hopeless battle, knowing they wouldn't make it out

alive.

And that includes Wutai troops.

SOLDIERs have been around for years, and they've reshaped the nature of the war being fought in Wutai. That's not only on the side of Shinra either - the Wutai warriors have adapted too. They've learned. And they never, if they were to help it, to try to take SOLDIER head on anymore.

And there are SOLDIERs, not all of them but some, who take full advantage of it whenever they can. Angeal most certainly does. Because there's another truth, rarely acknowledged.

Most people don't want to kill other people.

On a report it looks something like this:

"Shortly after the engagement began, the Wutai troops deployed a diversion in order to make their escape. Unfortunately, this made following them impossible."

In reality it looks like this:

Angeal walks down the path, making himself loud and obvious. The Wutai troops spot him. There's about a dozen of them, armoured men and women armed with gunspears. They aren't expecting him, but they can recognise his uniform. It makes them wary.

They take a few warning shots at him, which Angeal quickly deflects with the Buster Sword. Then he's left with a dilemma quite literally in his hands.

He doesn't usually draw his sword on people. It was easy not to, before, he wasn't really able to use it. Now he can use it, but, uh… if he takes the Buster Sword on a person…

The two sides size each other up. There's a moment of posturing.

"What are you doing here, Shinra?" demands the warrior in lead, wearing captain's colours.

"I'm sorry, but I can't answer that," Angeal says, feeling a little awkward with the sword now. "Shinra business. I'm going to have to ask you to go back the same way you came from."

"You want us to leave, from our home? You have some nerve! Who are

you, SOLDIER, what is your name?"

"I am Angeal Hewley - and you are?"

His name might not be as known as that of Sephiroth, but it's known enough. SOLDIER Firsts carry a similar level of recognition as Wutai generals, and his name is usually enough.

He isn't usually holding a huge sword, though, and the Wutai troops look somewhat alarmed now.

Angeal clears his throat and rests the Buster Sword on his shoulder, trying for casual rather than… excessively forceful. "Your name, sir?"

The Wutai squad looks to their captain, who makes a decision. "I am captain Deng Yuto. It is my honour to face commander Hewley in battle." He bows and then grabs his spear and shouts to his squad, "Get ready!"

For a moment it looks like they might actually rush at him - then one of them throws something. It cracks on the dirt road between them, and there's an explosion of smoke, footsteps, confusion.

And then the Wutai Captain murmurs a quiet mantra and brings out a Summon, lighting the acrid smoke in a vivid red glow.

"Here we go," Angeal murmurs, looking up. Before him looms a fiery demon, with flames dancing on its back, behind its impressive horns. Smiling slightly, he tightens his grip on the Buster Sword. "Ifrit, huh? Great - I have been wanting to try these new tricks I've been learning!"

It's not the first time he's been left facing a Summon rather than people, and quite honestly, he prefers it. There's not much honour in fighting people who can't truly meet him at his level. A man's honour can only take so much, fighting against weaker opponents.

But a *Summon* is something very different.

Angeal waits standing still until the Ifrit attacks, and then ducks out of the way - and then back closer, to get a few hits in, using the Buster Sword to its full advantage. And damn if it's not gratifying, to put his recent lessons to the test!

Ifrit isn't the strongest of Summons, but it's formidable enough and far above the usual monsters of Wutai. This one is a higher level one too - someone put a lot of effort into maturing it. It's one hell of a workout.

Being able to swing his sword and feel it do real damage…

"Whoa, that the hell is that -"

"On guard! Stay alert!"

Angeal falters, realising that the Wutai troops hadn't run away - they'd moved back, but stayed to watch, and now they're watching out for someone else. Quickly he jumps away from the Ifrit's blow and looks where they're looking - up in the trees?

It's… Sephiroth. Who is - what?

"Uh?" Angeal manages, confused - and then Ifrit is upon him, trying to blow him away with a fiery fist. Angeal drags his attention back to the fight and goes about finishing it as quickly as he can. He must've seen it wrong.

Whatever he saw isn't as important as the fact that Sephiroth is here at all. He was supposed to be doing his Alignment practice - why is he here? And… how would he react to all this?

Before he lost his memories, Sephiroth never humoured the Summons - and he too has a reputation. One far worse than Angeal's.

Angeal whittles the Ifrit's HP to zero as quick as he can, and the Summon breaks. Breathing hard, Angeal checks the Wutai troops - still there, frozen in place - and then he looks at Sephiroth.

Who lands, light as a feather, not far from him.

"... What are you doing here?" Angeal manages.

"I was told there was going to be trouble," Sephiroth says, a complicated look on his face, and apparently not thinking there was anything unusual about his own ability to, what, *fly?* He looks at the Wutai troops instead, eyes narrowed.

"I've got this handled," Angeal says slowly, worried it might turn into a bloodbath after all. "You didn't need to come."

Sephiroth glances at him, and his expression goes cold and inscrutable. "You're *worried,"* he says, sounding somewhere between confused and offended. "Why?"

Because Angeal wasn't planning to fight, really, and he wasn't planning to kill. There wasn't any reason for it. The Wutai squad were

just checking out the unusual activity in a place they knew to be abandoned - they weren't geared for an assault. Certainly there might be a full assault later, after they'd confirmed who had taken residence in the abandoned house they might choose to attack them, but that is different. If the enemy planned and executed an attack, even knowing who they were, then of course there would be a fight, but…

Killing these people here and now, when there's no mission and no orders and *no point* other than to keep them from passing information on… information that would be passed on regardless…

These men aren't a threat to us, Angeal wants to say. But Sephiroth didn't get his moniker for being understanding or merciful. And Angeal isn't sure how he will react now.

Angeal opens his mouth, but before he can speak, the Wutai Captain steps forward. "My name is Deng Yuto," the captain says bravely and brandishes his gunspear at Sephiroth. "I challenge you, Demon of Wutai, for the lives of my men."

Angeal's heart aches for him. The man's spear point doesn't even quiver. Angeal looks at Sephiroth, who probably doesn't even understand the custom he's witnessing. "You don't have to do this. Please. Let me handle this."

Sephiroth looks at him and hums, thoughtful. For a moment, Angeal dares to hope…

And then Sephiroth draws his sword and turns away.

"I accept your challenge."

There hadn't been all that many duels in PIDW. There was Sha Hualing's invasion, sure, but Shen Qingqiu barely even needed to fight there, he'd just let his sword fly and do all the talking, and that was fine. There'd been other fights, of course, serious fights against demons and beasts, but not that many formal duels.

Most of the fighting Shen Qingqiu had done had been sparring - and a great majority of that against his students. He was primarily a teacher, after all, not a frontline combatant, and he enjoyed sparring with his cute little disciples. There was nothing greater than seeing your student realise they were improving.

It, probably, left him with some bad habits, when it comes to duelling. He can't quite turn off the censorious eye of a master, looking for flaws in his opponent's stances, looking where they have room left to improve.

Deng Yuto is technically very good, his form is solid and his blows precise, he's clearly been taught by a good teacher. But he's very stiff and formal and puts too much emphasis on the transitions - something that can become a habit when you learn your forms in big groups.

If he was one of Shen Qingqiu's students, he'd be praising him for his efforts and telling him to let loose, to set aside the lessons and really go with the flow! He clearly has the techniques down - now is the time to learn how to apply them freely!

But Deng Yuto isn't Shen Qingqiu's student.

He's Sephiroth's opponent. And Sephiroth is probably supposed to kill him.

Blocking another technically perfect but very stiff attack with Masamune, Sephiroth considers his options. Angeal is standing somewhere behind him, radiating concern and worry and fear. Reno is hiding in the woods nearby and probably recording everything, if not on video - because cameras here are still huge and hard to lug around, thankfully - then in writing. And across from Sephiroth, behind his opponent, stands a squad of Wutai warriors, cheering for their captain and nervously waiting for the outcome.

Sephiroth wishes he had time to analyse their character design. It's delightfully mixed. Sleeveless tangzhuang shirts with more Japanese armour - what is it with this world and their disdain for sleeves, anyway? SOLDIER with their sleeveless turtlenecks, and now this. What, is everyone living for their next chance to flex their biceps or something? Don't they get cold? Tch!

Sadly, it probably means he can't find a proper Xianxia style hanfu in Wutai. Shame.

Deng Yuto steps back, swinging his spear decisively. "Fight me seriously!" he demands, and Sephiroth realises he'd fallen into a teacher's mindset after all, stepping back and letting his opponent lead.

"Ah," Sephiroth sighs. He's being insulting to his opponent. "Very well. If that's what you want."

His opponent braces himself, pale but determined. Behind him his men fall quiet, watching with expectant horror. It's painfully clear what they expect.

Aiyah, guess he better make it quick and impressive for them!

Sephiroth salutes his opponent with the Masamune - and then slices Deng Yutos gunspear into four pieces and finishes with the edge of his blade at the man's throat.

"You're finished," Sephiroth says to the man left holding the remains of his spear shaft. "Yield."

Judging by the look the man gives him, he might've as well told him to dance a jig. "What?"

Your life, man! Take it! "Yield."

Deng Yuto's hands shake and he drops his spear. "I do not," he says. "I challenged you for my men's lives - I will not yield them."

What? "I don't want your men's lives," Sephiroth says, exasperated. "And I don't want to take *yours.* Yield and *leave."*

The silence is deafening.

Then *, "... Maybe the butchers at Shinra have finally given the Demon a full lobotomy?"* someone in the Wutai group suggests, in Mandarin.

Which is kind of confusing for Sephiroth's brain because he kind of hadn't realised they *weren't* speaking Mandarin before? Uh…

"It must be some kind of trick."

"He's lost his mind…"

"Hasn't he always been insane?"

"We can't trust him - the Demon is a monster, he has no honour. They let us go and follow us to kill the lord -"

Sephiroth looks at them over Deng Yuto's shoulder, blinking slowly. For a moment he thinks of doing or saying nothing… but his drama-loving heart couldn't bear letting this go. *"What thick faces Wutai warriors have, to say such things right in front of the one they're insulting."*

The captain stiffens and the Wutai warriors all go very quiet. "Oh,

great," Angeal mutters behind Sephiroth. "Now what?"

"Who taught you to speak our tongue?" Deng Yuto asks warily.

"No one. This one simply learned," Sephiroth answers and arches a brow. *"Is this Sephiroth not allowed? Is the language sacred?"*

"... Your mode of speech is archaic," Deng Yuto comments, looking confused.

Ah, well. Probably! That's what happens when you end up as a highly respectable Peak Lord in a Xianxia stallion novel for years! Though he doesn't have that big of a sample yet, the way the Wutai soldiers speak the language sounds a little rude to him. So informal!

With a scoff, Sephiroth draws his sword away and sheathes it. Behind him, Angeal breathes out a sigh of relief.

"You are letting us go?" Deng Yuto asks, unsure.

"Does Captain Yuto wish to die?" Sephiroth asks plainly and tries to be haughty. Think, big bad. *"This Sephiroth will oblige, should Captain Yuto make it necessary. But as of now, this one has no interest in death."*

There's a confused murmur going through the Wutai warriors, though nothing distinct enough to make out. Deng Yuto motions them to be quiet and looks at Sephiroth levelly. *"Then what is… Sephiroth's interest here? Why has he come to this place?"*

Sephiroth considers his answer and then decides, fuck it. It's not like he's going to fight this war, anyway! *"This one is seeking seclusion and an opportunity to better himself."*

There's an incredulous wheeze coming from the group of Wutai warriors. *"He expects us to believe that?!"*

Sephiroth says nothing to that, arching his brows at Deng Yuto. After a moment, the Wutai Captain takes off his helmet, to reveal a man in his thirties with a serious but handsome face and long black hair in a tail. He puts his helmet under his arm and for a moment looks at Sephiroth, clearly trying to figure him out and just as clearly failing.

Ah, he must be really OOC right now. It's surprisingly gratifying! Life without a System is truly great.

"Sephiroth is not here to fight?" Deng Yuto finally asks, slow and

incredulous.

Ah, well. *"This one can't deny he has orders,"* Sephiroth admits. *"But as things stand, no. This Sephiroth is in seclusion and would rather concentrate on his personal cultivation."*

Judging by the reaction that gets, they not only understand the word, but they also get what he means by it. There's shock, some incredulity and what's clearly intrigue in Deng Yuto's face. He looks at Sephiroth like he's seeing something new and strange.

Not that strange, though, it turns out! Whether it's based on Taoism, Buddhism, or something else, it seems like this world has some form of cultivation, after all.

Isn't that an interesting turn of events?

51-53

"Angeal Hewley speaking."

"Well, you sound chipper tonight. Is Wutai not treating you right?"

"Oh. Hello, Genesis. How are things in Midgar?"

"Things are… they are such as they are. The work of a hero never ends. And so forth."

"That good, huh?"

"Mmm. Now do tell me why you sound like someone gone trampling all over your honour."

"Heh, nothing so bad, I promise. Just, you know. Sephiroth."

"More of his glowing *Alignment* practice?"

"..."

"Oh, so it's something *new* now? Do tell! All of us in Midgar are *dying* to know how things are developing. How is the Healer of Worlds doing?"

"... I guess the Turks have already reported it. Well. For one, he's learned how to fly."

"... Come again?"

"Sephiroth learned to fly. Or, I guess, it's more like weightlessness? He can make himself feather-light and just jump on tree tops and glide around."

"... Angeal, my dear friend, this isn't time for jokes."

"Oh, I'm not joking, Genesis, I'm really not. He can fly now. It's really something. He didn't so much explain as he insinuated, but I think it's some kind of gravity or mass manipulation that he can now do. Because of his Alignment practice. Apparently it's bearing fruit."

"... Wonderful. *Infinite in mystery is the gift of the Goddess. We seek it thus, and take to the sky.* Some of us literally."

"Suppose that's one interpretation of it."

"Tch. And I suppose by now the Good Professor has been informed, and we will be hearing of these developments from him directly."

"Probably, yeah."

"Tch. Well, I suppose it would be nice to know how to fly. How many of us will end up with our wings clipped before such heights are achieved, forever…"

"Genesis…"

"They still don't admit that there have been deaths. Janson was supposedly *killed in action* , but he wasn't even on a mission at the time. The others have been cadets, but it's only a matter of time."

"I'm sorry. I wish I was there."

"No you don't. Be glad you aren't - though, as G type SOLDIERs, you and I aren't compatible with these new *methods* anyway. Such fortune we have, such graces we have been granted."

"We all signed up for this. We all volunteered, in order to enter the program."

"Yes, and not a single one of us knew what that meant. Well, except perhaps for Sephiroth. Not that he ever truly signed up. You know, I have been looking into his history, I've dug out his medical records, trying to figure out what they are after -"

"Genesis, that's a breach of trust -"

"The lives of my men matter to me more than Sephiroth's secrets and pride. Not that the files were any help - the story they paint is more a horror story than anything. Whatever Hojo is trying to recreate, if it takes as many experiments as Sephiroth has gone through…"

"I thought they already nailed down the cause. The overdose, right?"

"That's the prevalent theory, yes. But after the first few cases of Mako Poisoning and death, they rather gave up on recreating that particular experiment at least."

"They gave up? But, aren't they still calling SOLDIERs in for extra doses?"

"They are, but there's not as much Mako in it. They're injecting something else, now - more of the carrier agent, supposedly - though Goddess alone knows how many had to be resuscitated for them to get the point."

"... What's the current total of casualties?"

"Four deaths including Janson and seven in coma, two of them SOLDIER. Oh, and one confirmed *brain death,* which is just lovely."

"A SOLDIER?"

"No… a cadet. What they're keeping him alive for I don't know, but… there we have it."

"... Shit."

"Angeal Hewley, is that cursing I hear?! What a day to be alive."

"Very funny. How do you know about what's going on in the labs? I thought they'd pretty much banned you from them?"

"They did, but I have my ways."

"... Right. Do *your ways* explain why Lazard isn't doing anything about this?"

"Not much he can do. Hojo will do what he wants, and he'd promised Heidegger a new, *higher* class of SOLDIER after this, so you can imagine *his* reaction. And of course the President is all for it!"

"Ah, I… see."

"Indeed. You know what they're saying in the labs now? They're saying that SOLDIERs were created to be the second coming of the Ancients. That we were supposed to be able to, among other things, cast spells without the need of Materia."

"I… heard something like that too, a long time ago, but I didn't put much stock in it. It sounded a bit too fantastical for me."

"Well, supposedly, that's exactly what they wanted. They gave up on it, because, well, it didn't work, and because the side effects were even more useful. Superhuman soldiers! Much better than Ancient myths, when you have a war to be fought. Only now the war is almost over, and Sephiroth has apparently figured out *how to fly."*

"Ah."

"I can only imagine the consequences this will have."

"Yes, um. There's something else."

"Something else? Angeal, please don't tell me you're been holding out for me."

"Well, not really, but, um. Did you know Sephiroth can speak and read the Wutai language?"

"... I didn't, but I'm not surprised. Among SOLDIERs he's spent the most time over there."

"Well, I didn't know. The Turks didn't know. I don't think it's in his file either."

"Another thing he's been keeping to himself and can no longer remember why?"

"Maybe, but, Genesis, there's… another thing. There was a group of Wutai warriors that we intercepted, and Sephiroth had a one-in-one duel with their captain - and then he spoke with him. In their language. Now, I can't understand written Wutai at all, but I can sort of follow the conversations…"

"I am duly impressed, my friend. Though more with the idea of Sephiroth having a conversation with a Wutai soldier - *after* having a duel with them. What, did he raise their spirit somehow?"

"Very funny, but no, he didn't kill the man. That's not the point - Genesis, the Wutai Captain called Sephiroth's accent *ancient."*

"... Angeal, you're kidding me."

"Not like *Ancient* ancient. I'm pretty sure the moniker they use for Ancients is different. Ancestor, maybe? Something like that. Anyway, Deng Yuto called Sephiroth's accent ancient, meaning *really old."*

"... Huh. So to recap, Sephiroth gets a massive dose of Mako, flatlines, comes back, forgets almost everything about himself, develops some new habits, has a bunch of strange questions about the way Materia, Mako, EXP and MP work… and now he's developing new magical abilities, and speaking a language like someone from a long time ago."

"That's about the size of it."

"Damn."

"... Yeah."

"... Hey, Angeal?"

"Yes, Genesis?"

"I think I have a theory of what's going on."

"I thought you might."

"I don't doubt that it's important, but… are you sure this is the right time to leave Midgar? With what is going on in the Science Department… we need all the hands we have here."

"That's why I'm recalling Reno and Rude," Tseng answers, as he finishes tidying up his desk. "I'll take over for them and they'll take over for me. You'll take the lead for now, fill them in."

Cissnei sighs, clasping her elbows loosely, glancing around the office. It already seems a little emptier. "You're the best informed on the situation here, Acting *Director* Tseng."

Tseng gives her a look and picks up his suitcase. "I know it's a lot to ask this suddenly, but you'll be fine. You have good instincts, Cissnei. And you won't be by yourself for long - Reno and Rude will be here in a day. They'll help you."

"I know I will be fine," Cissnei says with a smile. "The Science Department is usefully sexist, they won't even notice my existence. I just don't like the implication that whatever is going on with Sephiroth trumps what's going on here. That recording must've been bad news."

She hadn't understood more than a few words, her Wutai was still rudimentary - but just hearing Sephiroth, of all people, speaking the language fluently was a bit startling. And judging by Tseng's reaction…

Tseng hesitates and then turns away from his desk. "There's a very real chance that Sephiroth might be thinking of deflection. He's certainly showing sympathy towards the Wutai cause - I don't have to tell you what kind of disaster that would be for the company."

"... No, I get it," Cissnei says and sighs. "It *would* be a disaster."

"Reno and Rude aren't equipped to handle it. I am not either, no one is, but at least I can offer an alternative view on the situation."

"Alright," Cissnei hums with understanding. "... I'm not put in charge of the office, right?" she then asks and offers him a smile. "Be a bit weird, to put the rookie in charge."

"Rude will be in charge of the office once he gets back - Reno will manage operations. Anything more important than the usual fare, you refer it back to me," Tseng instructs. "But this ongoing situation with the SOLDIER program, I want you to stay on top of it, alright?"

"Of course," Cissnei agrees. "I'll keep watch. I'll message you about any new developments."

"Mn," Tseng nods, and together they head for the elevators.

Cissnei is quiet until they make it inside and begin the slow ride to the top.

"So, what is really going on with Sephiroth?" she asks curiously, giving her boss a sideways look. "I've heard so many rumours. He's developing new magical abilities, right? Ones he doesn't need Materia for."

"Mn. There are many theories," Tseng says. "It's impossible to say which one is closest to the truth. The most common is that he's learned to… read the Mako in his veins."

Cissnei arches her brows and leans against the side of the elevator. "Read it, like… read the memories in the Lifestream?"

Tseng gives her a look. "Don't let anyone from the Science Department hear you say that."

Cissnei grins cheekily. "I won't! But that's it, isn't it? The same Ancient knowledge that makes Materia produce magic is in Mako, right? And Sephiroth has more Mako in him than anyone. So he has the most potential knowledge. Right?"

Tseng shakes his head. "That's the theory."

"Oh, so you don't think that's it?"

"Hmm. I don't know what to think yet. I haven't had the chance to

fully observe him. But based on Reno and Rude's reports… no, I don't think that's it. Or at least, it's not all of it."

"Oh?" Cissnei asks interestedly, clasping her elbows again and looking at him closely. "What then? Is it the Ancient blood in his veins?"

Tseng casts her a sideways look. "Where did you hear that?"

"Oh, it's going around! Rumour has it he's a descendant of the Ancients - that's why he looks the way he does, all mystic and ethereal."

Tseng hums noncommittally and looks up at the floor counter. "Is that right?"

Cissnei grins at him. It absolutely is. "So, is that what's going on? Sephiroth coming into his own as an Ancient?"

"I wouldn't know," he says flatly. "And I won't make any conclusions until I see him. As it is, wherever is going on in his head isn't as important as what he will do going forward. He can sprout horns and tail, for all I care, so long as he stays on the right side when he does it."

"How *cold,"* Cissnei says teasingly. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you didn't like him."

"I don't *like* him. I don't *dislike* him," Tseng says, not looking down from the counter. "But he's a valued part of the company."

"Mmhmm. Very valued," Cissnei agrees, smiling mirthlessly and then shakes her head. "You know, I kinda pity him."

"... For his upbringing?" Tseng asks.

"For his everything," Cissnei says and sighs. "I read his file too, you know - the unclassified bits, anyway. Sephiroth is like this refined concentrate of everything Shinra stands for. It's a lot for any one person to handle."

"... I guess that's one way to view it," Tseng muses, looking away.

Cissnei chuckles. Not even a bit of sympathy on his face. "So cold," she says and looks up as the doors open. Together they step out of the elevator and Cissnei walks Tseng towards the helicopter waiting on the pad. She hangs around while he goes about pre-flight checks and

the startup sequence.

"What about the girl in the slums?" Cissnei asks. "Should we check up on her for you while you're away?"

Tseng hesitates between flicking switches. "If you have the time. Just make sure she and her mother are alright. Keep your distance," he says.

"Of course, she won't even know I'm there," Cissnei agrees. "I don't suppose there's a file on her we should make notes on?"

"Make a new one."

Cissnei smiles and steps back away from the helicopter "Alright, alright, keep your secrets," she says. "Hope you have a safe trip, Tseng. Have fun in Wutai!"

"I won't," Tseng answers, pulling headphones on. "I never do."

Though the concept is called unscientific, and certain aspects of it are actively being suppressed by Shinra Science Department… there's no denying that there's something inherently magical about Mako. After all, Mako is what makes Materia, and with Materia you can cast spells, and no matter how Professor Hojo tries to deny it, it's a fact, indeed, undeniable.

Materia makes magic. Mako makes Materia.

There is also the open secret, the myth, the legend - the unscientific nonsense, as they put it. The theory of Lifestream and Spirit Energy and the concept that when something dies, the energy of that thing and all it collected and produced in life returns to the Planet, to the great collection of all the other things that died before. The great Lifestream from which all living things come and to which all living things return.

Shinra has spent a lot of money and effort suppressing and erasing those old faiths and traditions from public consciousness, and the *widely accepted theory* nowadays is that Mako is more like Coal and Oil - it's a deposit just beneath the Planet's crust that formed over millennia and which can now be harnessed by people. Nothing more. Nothing less.

But most people, no matter how they deny it or denounce it, know better.

Go back just two generations, and Mako isn't even a thing. The stories about the Lifestream, on the other hand, are thousands of years old.

And Genesis believes them wholeheartedly.

Well. He believes that the old myths have a basis in reality, anyway.

"When you use Materia as much as I do, you learn the difference between knowledge, power, and knowledge that *becomes* power," he explains, leaning back against the gym windowsill and lifting the shining marble of Restore Materia high up. "Materia is knowledge made physical, made *powerful.* It is wisdom crystallised, immortalised - and still living, well past the time of its origins."

"As you say, sir," the Second Class SOLDIER, Lacier Meres, agrees without looking up. He's sitting on the bench press, not pressing anything - instead he's leafing through a printed brochure.

Genesis continues. "That knowledge comes from somewhere - and it predates Shinra and its machinery. Materia existed thousands of years before us, and it will outlast us by thousands more," he says, examining the Materia in his hand. "I have seen orbs of Materia so old they must've first formed when the Ancients still existed."

"Very mysterious indeed, sir," Lacier agrees distractedly, turning a page.

"And I have seen Natural Materia only a few decades old," Genesis adds, narrowing his eyes at his Materia as he holds it against the light. Evening sun makes the Materia glimmer and glow. "I have held in my hand Materia as it spawned a copy."

"A miraculous event by any reckoning."

Genesis casts the Second Class a look, slightly annoyed by his lack of enthusiasm for the subject. There's no one else around, either, to appreciate his soliloquy. It's late, and they're the last ones in, sadly.

Even during all the drama going on, a slow week night remains a slow week night. The labs have closed for the day, the SOLDIER offices have closed for the day, and there are no theatre shows during week nights.

Genesis feels fit to fly at the walls with the need to *talk,* and there's no one to truly talk to, not about what he knows! It's unbearable.

"Do you know where the knowledge locked away in Materia comes from?" he presses on.

The Second Class shrugs. "The Ancients, sir?"

"The Ancients," Genesis repeats and lifts the Materia again. "So they say. But this Materia is young. It came from a production factory not a month ago. How is it then that the wisdom of the Ancients is in this Materia, when the Ancients have been dead for thousands of years?"

Lacier doesn't even bother answering, but Genesis doesn't care. He doesn't need an answer - he knows it.

The wisdom of the Ancients didn't just appear in the Materia when it was created. It existed before that, in the Mako that made it.

There exists wisdom - no. There is *knowledge* in Mako. Knowledge of the Ancients, maybe. Knowledge of the dead, certainly. How much of that knowledge did it take to make a single orb of Materia? How much Mako was there in a single orb of Materia?

How much Mako was there in a single SOLDIER? More or less than in an orb of Materia?

"Very good, sir," Lacier says vacantly.

Genesis is tempted to lob the Materia at his head. "I didn't say anything," he says cuttingly and shoves the Materia into his pocket. Then he hops down from the windowsill.

"That's very nice, sir - *hey,"* Lacier complains as Genesis yanks the brochure from his hands. "I was reading that! Uh, sir."

"And what exactly is this to be more important than paying attention to those around you, hm?" Genesis asks and flips the brochure over to see the front page.

It has an oversaturated black and white picture of Sephiroth in the front - along with the word *Sephiroth training session volume 1.*

"What is this?" Genesis demands. It doesn't look like it's from the Science Department.

"Just something we Seconds put together, sir," Lacier says, looking half

proud and half stubborn. "It's nothing much."

It's not a brochure. It's a combat tutorial, with photographs and written explanations, explaining a training session Sephiroth had given in excessive detail.

Genesis narrows his eyes and waves the leaflet in Lacier's face. "When was this?" he demands.

Lacier looks embarrassed, running a wide palm over his neck. "It was after the, uh. Incident? Sir."

"The incident. You mean when Sephiroth destroyed the training room and tried to kill Hojo?"

"Well, uh, yes."

Genesis arches a brow. "And when exactly between losing his mind and being carted out of Midgar did he have the time to give a training *session?* " According to Angeal, Sephiroth had been completely out of sorts and couldn't even stand under his own power afterward.

"It was pretty much during?" Lacier says, wincing. "He was kinda out of it still."

Genesis lowers the leaflet. "I am going to need you to explain," he says lowly. "Be *very* specific."

Lacier squirms but explains.

Apparently in the middle of his psychotic episode, Sephiroth was possessed by the spirit of a *school teacher.* "And not one of you thought to tell me this?"

"Well, sir, we… thought it would be best to keep it amongst ourselves," Lacier says awkwardly. "All of us agreed it wouldn't be good if… you know. It was pretty irregular."

"Irregular," Genesis scoffs and takes another look at the leaflet.

He didn't get enough of a chance to face off against the new Sephiroth to really build up an idea of how he fought, but even so… he can feel Sephiroth's hand in the poses displayed by various SOLDIERs in the photograph. He recognizes the starting pose.

It's the same Sephiroth schooled him in, after mocking his footing.

"It was pretty weird, sir," Lacier says. "He talked all funny. Called himself *this master* and stuff. Half of the stuff he said didn't make much sense. Still… the best training session I've ever had, as a SOLDIER."

Genesis hums and sits down on the bench press next to Lacier, reading the descriptions added to the photos. They're very detailed. There are quotes.

"Don't tempt Qi-deviation?" Genesis murmurs. It's the final line of the booklet, underlined and everything.

"Something he said at the end," Lacier shrugs. "No idea what it means though."

Genesis frowns and lowers the booklet to rest on his knee. Then he looks at the window and at Midgar below them, swathed in darkness and light of Mako-powered street lamps.

How much Mako did it take for knowledge within that Mako to begin to coalesce into Materia? How much Mako was there in a single SOLDIER?

How much Mako would it take… until the knowledge within that Mako began overwriting the host?

54-56

Now, Reno could be an impartial observer about this. He probably should be. Just do his job, sign his report, hand over his duty to someone else, and wash his hands of the whole mess.

But on the other hand, "So. Flying, huh?"

Sephiroth has the gall to look sheepish about it. He is actually fucking blushing. "Well. That's not exactly it, but, yes? Is that a problem?"

Reno eyes him flatly for a moment. Then he shrugs. "Hell if I know. You know, for a while there I thought you were actually trying to keep your magical metamorphosis thing down low, but you just don't give a fuck, do you?" It's kinda impressive, really.

"Um," Sephiroth answers, and takes a dainty little sip of his tea.

Reno snorts. "You're something else," he says and falls to sit across from him on the other side of the tiny little tea table. Then he looks around.

They're alone in the main hall of the safehouse. Hewley and Rude are out picking up Tseng from the town, and it's just him and Mr. No Gravity, and Reno doesn't mind admitting he might actually miss the place. It's still hilarious that Sephiroth turns into a prissy princess when it comes to decor, but Reno can't say he doesn't know what he's on about.

He actually made the place really nice, for an abandoned house. As safehouses went, it was up there.

Sephiroth watches him curiously. "Looking forward to returning to Midgar?"

"God, *yes,"* Reno says emphatically. "I'm going to find the nearest Pilferer's, and I'm going to forget all about your… everything."

"Pilferer's?"

"It's a chain of pubs," Reno explains, waving a hand. "Shit beer for cheap, good for one thing only."

"Ah," Sephiroth huffs in amused offence. "I'm not that bad, surely."

Well, no. Reno once had to act as *Scarlet's* bodyguard - that is still the worst assignment he's ever had. This doesn't come even close. But… "I don't know, man. You're kinda weird."

Sephiroth blinks at that, and Reno grimaces looking away. Sephiroth it's also kinda terrifying, even like this. Actually maybe *especially* like this. After his training sessions and meditations Sephiroth is all relaxed and cosy - it's probably the safest he is to be around, but it's *weird.*

It really brings home the fact that the guy is *different* from what he was. Even without Hewley there to react to it, you can tell. Sephiroth is someone else these days, and his shitty lying aside, none of them actually know him. And the guy isn't that keen on explaining.

… You know what, fuck it. Reno's out of here by the end of the evening anyway. "Are you ever going to explain what the hell is going on to anyone, or are we going to have to keep on guessing?" he asks.

Sephiroth hums, noncommittal.

"Because dude, it's going to have consequences in the long run. If not for you, then for the other SOLDIERs," Reno points out. "You know that, right?"

That makes the guy react with more than demure deflection, and Sephiroth lowers his cup. "Consequences like what?"

"Oh, you know, life-altering experiments in all the worst ways?" Reno asks and points a finger at him. "You realise what this all looks like from the outside, right? You get a deadly dose of Mako and boom, new abilities? You can be sure they're going to try to recreate those results."

Sephiroth frowns at that, looking down. He taps his finger against the tea cup for a moment and then shrugs. "I don't see what there is that I can do about that," he says and looks up at Reno pointedly. "First sign of trouble, and you ferried me out of Midgar, I assumed it was to get me out of the way."

"Well, yeah. For a reason," Reno shrugs and leans back a little. Fuck, the Mako shine is spooky when it's aimed at you like this, in dim light where you can *tell* the guy's eyes are actually emitting their own glow. "Seemed kinda necessary to keep you from going berserk again and killing someone important. Like Professor Hojo."

Sephiroth makes a funny sort of face at that, and sips his tea. From scary to embarrassed. Yay.

Never mind, Reno isn't going to miss this place at all. "Fuck it, whatever. I don't care," he decides. "Soon you'll be Tseng's problem, and I won't waste another moment thinking about you."

"I am hurt and heartbroken," Sephiroth says blandly and snorts at the face Reno makes at him. "You have been a most pleasant babysitter, Reno of the Turks. I'm sorry I didn't get the chance to get to know you."

"Oh, put a cork in it."

"No, I'm serious," Sephiroth says. "I've always found the Turks to be intriguing. Your… work ethics are almost admirable."

Reno eyes him dubiously. "You're fucking with me."

Sephiroth grins, clasping the little tea cup loosely between both hands. "Not at all. There's a core of morals that runs through your agency that I find fascinating. The scary, underhanded enforcers and spies of Shinra - hiding just enough of a shred of decency to make you… rational. Practical and yet, strangely, sympathetic."

Reno gapes at him. What the fuck - where the hell did that come from?

Sephiroth chuckles at his expression. "I think I would quite like you, if the circumstances were different," he muses and pours himself another cup of tea.

Reno feels like objecting. He can feel his cheeks heating up. "You are *absolutely* fucking with me."

Sephiroth grins a little wider at that, and - damn, the guy's smiles are kinda devastating. Reno had been carefully not noticing, because, hello, *job,* but damn. Who the hell made this guy so hot? His lips are insanely pretty.

Reno is suddenly very aware that it's been a while since he last got laid and that he really desperately needs a drink.

"Tseng is originally from Wutai, isn't he?"

"Wha?"

Sephiroth arches his brows and tilts his head. A stand of silver hair slides across his shoulder. "Tseng. Is he from Wutai?"

Reno thought he'd gotten used to the fancy dress shirts - and hell, Sephiroth had his chest pretty much completely bared before! Why the hell are just two buttons undone so sexy all of a sudden?!

"Oh, um. Yeah?" Reno agrees and clears his throat, shaking his head. Don't look at his collarbones. "He knows the lay of the land better anyway, so, you know, if your little soiree with the Wutai Captain has a follow up, he'll probably know what's up." … Uh.

Sephiroth gives him that slow blink again, and Reno doesn't blame him - it sounds like complete nonsense to him too.

Damn it, get it together, man, the guy isn't *that* fuckable!

… Except that he really, *really* is, and Reno wishes he could go back to professionally *not noticing it.*

"That's good, I suppose," Sephiroth says slowly. "I'll be looking forward to hearing his insights."

"Yeah, yeah, sure…" Tseng also knows more about Ancients than anyone not dead or in the Science Department, so whatever is going on with Sephiroth, Tseng would be able to figure it out. Probably.

Reno looks at Sephiroth's stupidly pretty face and then clears his throat. "Well, it's been - different. Let's never do it again. Try not to go nuts and kill any important scientists in the future, okay?"

Sephiroth looks away, his eyes going a little distant. "... No promises," he murmurs. Except coming from him, it's more of a *purr,* isn't it?

Fuuuck, Reno really needs to get out of here.

It's probably a good thing Tseng seems to kinda dislike Sephiroth for some reason. He wouldn't have this problem.

"Good evening and welcome back to Channel Zero News, where we relay you top news from around the Planet on the hour, every hour. I am Jackie Sanine, here with you in Midgar.

"First, let's take a look at what's going on with the war.

"The Wutai War has been ongoing for almost eight years now and has been noticeably winding down in the past year and a half. With only one major holdout of Wutai forces left in Fort Tamblin, it's safe to say that the war is all but won for Shinra and her allies. With Fort Tamblin under ongoing siege by Shinra, it is unlikely that there will be any noticeable movements anytime soon.

"Still, there are new developments in the Shinra front. We take you live with our correspondent Maiser Rav, who's in the front with the latest news from the trenches."

"Thank you, Jackie. I'm here in the town of Sang Fe, which has been occupied by Shinra forces since the fall last year when the town was discovered abandoned by a scouting party of Shinra SOLDIERs. Acting now as a major connection point and the only airfield in the area, Sang Fe has become a major staging location in this final stretch of the war.

"As you can see behind me, the Shinra forces here are well established. With the fall rain season soon upon us, they're more interested in digging rain channels, rather than trenches.

"Here's Corporal Leynri from Shinra Infantry troops, sharing his experiences in the trenches."

"We haven't actually ever used any trenches?"

"Thank you, Corporal Leynri. The camp in Sang Fe is truly a beacon for Shinra Military, boasting high numbers of both infantry and war machinery - never mind the high number of SOLDIERs.

"SOLDIER Second Class, Davidson, has been a regular at Sang Fe for a long time."

"Yeah, I've been here for a few months with the SOLDIER company. It's been fine - the local monsters give us more work than the Wutai troops do, really."

"Have there been any interesting incidents of late?"

"Well, not as such? It's just a lot of *hurry up and wait* right now. I guess the most interesting thing is that Sephiroth came and went, and no one really knows where he is right now. Somewhere in Wutai, but, yeah, who knows where."

"Thank you, SOLDIER Second Class Davidson. As we all know the

movements of SOLDIER First Class Sephiroth are of high interest to us all. Whenever Sephiroth is being deployed in the front, you can expect something big to follow. According to the various soldiers here, Sephiroth arrived a little over a week ago with a couple members of Shinra Investigation Sector of the Public Security Department, or Turks, as they're colloquially known. They were, by all appearances, on a high class secret mission, but no one knows where or what.

"Here's Colonel Havre, the camp commander, commenting on the rumours."

"I can't comment on the rumours."

"Thank you Colonel Havre. Aside from a few mysterious secret missions and the upcoming rain season, the life in Sang Fe is quite normal and calm, with the SOLDIERs and infantry members keeping in shape by using the local gym and taking part in team activities. It's important to keep your skills sharp even during your downtime.

"Trooper Guy here knows what's the best way to keep in shape."

"Yeah, I practise parade forms sometimes. Our sergeant is really keen on us getting the forms right, you know, to look good on camera. Hey, watch me do this -"

"Thank you, Trooper Guy, for that wonderful display of skill. While we were out collecting these interviews, we got a chance to talk to one of the more recent arrivals - SOLDIER First Class, Angeal Hewley, who arrived at the same time as Sephiroth."

"I arrived with Sephiroth. I'm sorry, I can't comment on his whereabouts or what he's been up to. Yeah, we've encountered Wutai troops, but how it went down is classified. Sephiroth was in high spirits the last I saw him. I don't know what his hair routine is? I'm sorry - I have new mission orders, I have to go. No, I'm sorry, I can't really say whether he could give an interview. I really have to go -"

"Unfortunately Angeal Hewley couldn't prove or disprove the rumours about secret missions. I suppose we will have to stay in suspense for now. I know I will be eagerly waiting for any developments and will be reporting back as soon as there's anything new to be reported.

"This has been Maiser Rav, reporting from Sang Fe camp in Wutai. Back to you, Jackie."

"Thank you, Maiser. It's truly heartening to see that things are going

well in Wutai. Do these news about Sephiroth's involvement in the war relate to the latest developments from Shinra Science Department concerning the updates to the SOLDIER program? Here's Gavin Lynch, with a glimpse into the mysterious world of Shinra's science research and development."

"Thank you Jackie. I'm here on the second floor of the Shinra Building, as the science floor has been evacuated due to an escaped specimen, which will no doubt soon be brought back under control. While we wait for contamination procedures to run their course, let's take a look at the history of the SOLDIER program through the eyes of the employees here.

"Laboratory Technician Berk, a long time contributor to Shinra's most advanced science developments, about how he feels about the impact his work has had on the world."

"Oh god, oh god, please let me quit, I haven't seen my family in two weeks."

"Thank you Laboratory Technician Berk. Professor Hojo, the head of Shinra Science Department, is known for his… high standards and… work ethics. Many in this team are hardened veterans in their field, and have been involved in the SOLDIER program for many years.

"Nurse Sinclair, what can you tell us about the rumours about new methods being introduced within the SOLDIER program by the Professor?"

"..."

"Nurse Sinclair? Ma'am, what can you tell us about the rumours concerning new procedures for creating SOLDIERs?"

"..."

"Nurse Sinclair?'

"... I need to call my mom. Excuse me…"

"... Thank you Nurse Sinclair! I think judging by that thousand yard stare, things are really happening and we can expect something new and exciting from the Shinra Science Department in the upcoming days! This has been Gavin Lynch reporting from Shinra Building! Back to you in the studio, Jackie."

"Thank you Gavin, for these enlightening insights. We will be looking for further developments in the near future!

"Next up, sports, as we go to the world of chocobo racing where a scandal is brewing - is chocobo inbreeding the secret to the ultimate racing bird? Joining us is…"

Sephiroth knows he's on borrowed time. He bought it, accidentally, with his Qi-deviation… but it's been well over a week since then, without any other deviations. Instead he has had other more interesting developments… and the timer never stopped ticking.

For over a week he's been fine - for over a week he's been doing… pretty much nothing but training. Which in PIDW wouldn't have been a big deal - things happened slower, developments took time, everyone went into seclusion every now and then, and it was fine. When your life revolves around cultivation, haste is an enemy. Cultivation takes decades - sometimes centuries! You need to take your time with it! Months upon months had passed Shen Qingqiu by without him doing anything but laying and reading, and it had been great!

But he's in a sci-fi fantasy dystopia, in the middle of a war, and he's the Big Bad super SOLDIER hybrid. Something the world seems keen to remind him.

"Tseng of the Turks," his new guard introduces himself in the front of the charcoal burner's house. "I will be taking over for Reno and Rude."

Sephiroth can almost see a clock behind Tseng, ticking down to a deadline. He's just as sharply handsome as the game art made him seem - and even less flexible. Everything about him from his posture up his clothing to the precise lack of expression screams *you're wasting the company's time, and mine.*

"I know who you are," Sephiroth says, setting his face carefully blank as the vibes around the house just about plummet. "To think I rate such a high level watchman."

"Your wellbeing is of the highest priority to the company," Tseng agrees. "I'm here to ensure your recovery goes by smoothly so that you can return to your duties promptly."

Arching a brow, Sephiroth folds his arms. Well, isn't that a corporate speech if he's ever heard it. "I'm honoured," he says. "Though I thought the highest priority for me was to, what was it… stay here and get my shit together?"

Tseng's expression doesn't even twitch. "According to Reno's and Rude's reports, your *shit* seems to be held together remarkably well."

… oh? Smiling a little, Sephiroth looks Tseng up and down. "You'd think so, hm?"

Tseng is quiet for a moment before clasping his hands behind his back. "We shall see. For now, you should act as though nothing has changed. Pretend I'm not even here. I won't disturb your training."

"I don't think I can," Sephiroth muses, testing the waters. "Your very presence is disturbing."

Not even a twitch of an eye lash. "Are you disturbed now?"

Oh, what a bitch! Sephiroth likes him already. "I guess we *shall* see, at that. Now, where is Angeal?" he glances around, even though he knows Angeal didn't come back with Tseng.

"On a mission, I presume," Tseng says, and Sephiroth casts him a sharp look. Tseng faces him blandly. "Judging by the reports, his presence here was largely unnecessary to your progress. It is an inefficient use of company resources to have two First Class SOLDIERs indefinitely off the clock. He is taking up your missions here in Wutai."

Sephiroth can feel his own expression growing blank. "I didn't agree to that."

"It was assumed you didn't mind," Tseng says calmly. "Seeing as you didn't seem interested in completing your missions yourself, they were simply passed down the chain. To Angeal."

"It would've been nice to have been consulted on that," Sephiroth says firmly.

"Would you have taken on the missions if you'd known?" Tseng asks with the slightest arch of his brows. "Because unless you would have, your opinion had no bearing on the matter going forward. "

… Okay, ouch. "I see," Sephiroth says, his voice growing low. "Will Angeal be returning here once he's done?"

Tseng blinks at him, slowly. "This location isn't near any of the current points of interest in Wutai. That's why it was selected for your use. It's much more practical for Angeal to stay in the town."

Ah. Well, well, if it isn't those company shackles he'd been happily ignoring. Damn. "... So it's just you and me here, huh?" Sephiroth asks unhappily.

"Only until you feel fit to return to taking on missions," Tseng says and then asks, pointedly, "Do you have an estimate on how much longer will your cultivation training take?"

Sephiroth looks at him closely, but it's hard to say what Tseng thinks - or what he knows. The man just looks at him coolly, expectantly. "I suppose that's another thing we will have to see, isn't it?" Sephiroth answers, just to be contrary. "Alright - do you need help finding a room, Tseng of the Turks?"

Tseng considers him for an uncomfortably long time and then says, "I think I can manage. I will set up in the room vacated by Reno, unless you have objections."

"Be my guest," Sephiroth says and then watches as the man heads inside. Then he looks out to the yard - to the training field Angeal had cleared out for him.

It doesn't seem quite as comfortable as before, all of a sudden.

Of course their stay here was always going to be temporary, and Sephiroth hadn't exactly expected them to leave together. It's just that… he'd figured he'd be leaving first, to parts unknown, maybe with Angeal, but probably not. Angeal is still too loyal to the company - honestly, and he might very well stay loyal until the degradation would begin. Which is… something Sephiroth still hadn't figured out a solution for. Beyond a regular Qi-transfer, maybe.

Shit. He'd procrastinated too long, hadn't he? He'd gotten complacent. He always gets complacent.

Now the matter of Genesis and Angeal might be out of his hands. The company is isolating him, for whatever reason, he doesn't even care. It's manipulation, either way. Now Angeal is out there, maybe killing people in his stead, and Sephiroth has no say in the matter. And Sephiroth is alone with no friends to lean on, as the head Turk in command begins prodding him for *results*.

Great. Wonderful. Such fun.

Closing his eyes briefly, Sephiroth sighs and then looks up at the darkening night sky.

Tick-tock, goes the clock, as time starts running out.

57-59

Crossing his hands behind his neck, Zack looks up at the 1/10000 holographic model of Midgar, proudly displaying what it would look like once they finally finished all the plates. It's pretty impressive and detailed, all lit up and glowing and stuff. It's taller than he is and takes most of the room. It's pretty impressive.

Zack glaces around the room, wondering how long he ought to keep looking at empty corners before he could call it.

While the SOLDIER Seconds scoured the Science floors, the Thirds had been tasked with checking the rest of the building for any sign of the experimental subject that had somehow gotten out of the labs. Zack had been assigned the Skyview hall - which, though a pretty damn cool place to patrol, was also pretty much bound to be a waste of time. There's like half a dozen floors between Skyview and the Science floor, and the only way in is through the elevator. How was some *specimen* going to use an elevator?

Still, pretty cool. Though he'd been to the Skyview about a dozen times now, it's not something you can get bored of. To a country boy like him, the hologram displays are pretty much magic.

"Any escaped specimens please come out, come out, whenever you are," Zack calls and wonders how the rest of his squad was doing. Maybe they could go out and do some monster hunting after this. "Heere specimen, specimen, specimen -"

"... Um?"

… *um?* "Huh?" Zack asks and looks around. That was definitely a voice. "Who's there?"

"... oh no, I wasn't discovered at all," is the mumbled reply. "Um, ignore me, then, please! I'm not a specimen!"

It's coming… from the display. There's someone hiding *inside* the model, underneath the glowing holograms.

"Uh, I think you better come out of there, man," Zack says, more confused than anything. Maybe a tourist that had gotten stuck when they closed the building down? "I don't think you're supposed to be there. What are you even doing there, man?"

"... Nothing?"

"... Yeah, that's not going to fly. Sorry, man." Zack rests his hands on his hips. "If you don't come out, I'm probably gonna have to drag you out. Or something."

"Umm… I'll - I'll come out," the voice answers, and someone comes crawling out from underneath the model of Midgar.

It's a kid, dressed up in a… hospital gown?

"Uh," Zack says, looking him up and down. "... You are the escaped specimen, aren't you?"

The kid squirms, looking uncomfortable and nervous. He fiddles with the edge of the gown. "I'm - not?" he offers hopefully.

"You literally have a Science Department bracelet on," Zack points out, a bit uncomfortable. He didn't know the specimen was a human - never mind a *kid.*

The kid clasps a hand around the bracelet and looks at him imploringly. His pupils are completely blown and his pale hair is a mess. "I'm not supposed to - I was going to - please don't take me back."

Zack scratches at the back of his head awkwardly. He doesn't really know what to do here. The kid doesn't even have *shoes* on. "Um, what were you in the labs for?"

"Oh, I was going to join the SOLDIER program," the kid says, a little too earnest. "And then I was going to spy for someone. But then Professor Hojo said my brain was useful. And I think he was maybe going to do something about my brain. Like cut it out maybe? So I ran away."

"Uh," Zack says confusedly, flashing back to some stuff Kunsel had told him about the Science floors. "Wait, hang on - spy?"

"Oh no, I wasn't supposed to say that," the kid says and curls up, fiddling with the hem of his pale blue gown. "Please forget I said that."

Zack shakes his head, too confused not to ask, "Who were you spying on? And why?"

The kid squirms a little. "Oh, well, the Professor? Because he's getting

SOLDIERs killed? I was supposed to find out what he was doing. And I did," the kid says and nods proudly. "He's trying to figure out how to give SOLDIERs lethal doses of Mako without permanently killing them."

Zack gapes at him. "He's - what? *Why?!"*

"Because there's a reaction," the kid explains earnestly. "Give a subject enough Mako to momentarily stop the heart and give them some level of neurological damage and Mako will flood into those internal injuries. Hojo theorised that the damaged neurons are then replaced."

"... by the *Mako?"* Zack asks, feebly.

"What are *you* doing?" asks a new voice directly behind Zack, who immediately whirls around and grabs a sword, stepping up in front of the kid to defend him.

Then he sees who it is. "Genesis - sir?" he says weakly.

It can't be anyone else - no one but the Firsts get away with shirking uniform regs, and Genesis Rhapsodos' style is pretty well known. The red leather is unmistakable.

Genesis narrows his eyes and then looks down at Zack's standard issue SOLDIER sword. "What are you doing?" he asks dangerously.

"Uh, well," Zack says and panics.

The kid behind him is the escaped specimen he's supposed to be bringing in. Genesis is here probably to also bring him in. But the kid is a kid. And he's obviously been drugged. And there was something about his *brain?!*

Genesis arches his brows.

"Um," Zack says, knowing very well that he can't stand against a SOLDIER First Class and yet not sure what else he can do. Ahh, he's screwed! "Can we talk about this?"

Genesis looks at him, at his sword, and then past him at the kid. Then he looks at Zack again. "Are you seriously pointing your sword at *me* to defend an *escaped specimen?"*

"I guess so?" Zack says helplessly. "I mean, he's just a kid, sir?"

"I'm fifteen, actually!" the kid pipes up behind him. "I'm not that much

younger than you."

Zack grimaces at Genesis. "Please don't kill him. Or me," he says weakly. "That would suck. Sir."

Genesis snorts at him. "What's your name, SOLDIER Third Class?"

"It's… Zack," Zack says, wondering what he'd do if Genesis drew his sword on him. Maybe he could distract the First just enough for the kid to run to the elevators? "Zack Fair, sir."

"You have the makings of a hero, Zack Fair," the First Class says. Then he looks past Zack entirely. "Are you alright?"

… huh?

"I'm a bit cold, and I think Hojo injected me with a Mind Source," the kid says plaintively, blinking owlishly at Genesis. "Everything is going very fast, but also very slowly?"

Genesis clicks his tongue, displeased. "They do that, yes. It'll pass," he says, and with a single finger pushes Zack's sword aside. It's only then Zack registers that Genesis is holding a duffle bag in his other hand. "Come on, let's get you changed -"

"Wait," Zack says as the kid steps past him. "Wait, wait, wait - what? Do you two know each other?"

"Yes, and I will be getting him out of the building before someone less sympathetic finds him and takes him back to the labs," Genesis says, handing the bag to the kid, who shakily rummages through it for clothes. "Is that a problem, SOLDIER Third Class Zack?"

Zack sputters in a ridiculous urge to object and then shakes his head and quickly puts his sword away. "N-no, sir, no problem here!"

"You saw nothing and you know nothing," Genesis says, while the kid hastily pulls on trousers and a shirt. "Is that understood, SOLDIER?"

"Yes, sir," Zack answers.

"Good," Genesis nods and then ushers the slightly swaying kid towards the elevators, murmuring. "Come on, Chadley, let's get you out of here…"

Zack watches them go. Moments later, he's alone, feeling a bit like he'd just been run over by something fast and intangible.

… Yeah, Shinra is really not at all what he was expecting, is it?

The first day with Tseng as his babysitter begins easily enough. They have breakfast, they have tea, Tseng has impeccable manners, and even compliments the tea… There's no weird comments, no pointed looks, and when Sephiroth gets ready to train, Tseng says nothing, just follows him outside to watch.

And then he watches. He watches Sephiroth very closely. He watches *every movement* like he's looking for *flaws.* Sephiroth feels like he's being graded, like this is a test and every move he makes is being scored on a damn point scale!

Who could concentrate on cultivation like this?!

"Do you have to?" Sephiroth asks irritably.

"I am not doing anything," Tseng says mildly as if he's not just standing there, staring.

Giving him an unimpressed look, Sephiroth rests one hand on his hip. "Reno and Rude managed to observe without being in my face about it - can't you do the same?"

"If the result is the same, why does it matter which way I go about my observation?" Tseng asks. "I will still be observing, and you will still be aware of it."

"Yeah, but I wouldn't have to *see your face* doing it," Sephiroth says, annoyed.

"Inability to handle public pressure seems an odd quality for someone so… famous."

The guy is actually trying to piss him off. Sephiroth realises this with a mixture of incredulity and awe. Tseng is actually trying to make him, Sephiroth, the Big Bad with one psychotic episode already behind him, lose his temper. Does the guy have no survival instincts, or is this some kind of test?

Probably a test. The Turks are far too practical for it to be the other thing. And that makes it a little less annoying and far more worrisome.

"What do you want, Tseng?" Sephiroth asks slowly. "Do you want me to lose control?"

Tseng blinks at him, his face like a fine-featured mask. "Are you going to?"

Annoying. "Keep this up and I might."

"Very well," Tseng says and fucking *settles down to wait.*

Sephiroth suppresses the urge to tap his foot at the man and instead takes a step back mentally. It's another manipulation tactic, and it's not even subtle. Tseng is doing some corporate middle manager psychology bullshit, establishing authority through perceived roles in the corporate ladder.

I'm the observer and the judge. You are on trial. Now perform *for me.*

Ugh, it gives him the worst kind of flashbacks for Shen Yuan's family life. Did not miss that part of it one bit! But now that he knows what's up…

Sephiroth smiles at Tseng - who of course doesn't so much as blink in return, but Sephiroth can sense how he goes on guard.

You want to play office politics, sir? You picked the wrong Peak Lord.

"Very well," Sephiroth says pleasantly. "Then you can help me with this."

That makes Tseng actually react. "I'm sorry?"

"Your job here isn't just to observe me, is it? It's also to get me back to my duties promptly, right?" Sephiroth says and smiles a little wider. "That will occur much faster with your help."

Tseng hesitates, clearly sensing the trap.

"Unless you want my report to eventually include a section explaining how I could've, surely, returned to work faster, if only I had the cooperation of my coworker."

Tseng's eyes are narrow. "We are not coworkers."

"We work for the same company, don't we? In different branches, perhaps, but still within the same corporate structure - within the same department, even. Ultimately, aren't our goals within Shinra the

same?" Sephiroth purrs, putting all his smug villainy into it. "Surely we should be working together."

Now, Tseng could still decline. If this was your usual corporate politics, maybe he would've. But there's not much Tseng can actually gain in the attempt of putting Sephiroth down, seeing as they really are in very different fields within the company. So there's a different motive for his posturing. Question is, when given different avenues to pursue, which will tilt the scales? The original goal, whatever it was, or a new opportunity and all its potential gains?

What's the worth of an indebted Sephiroth to Tseng?

"Very well," Tseng finally says and steps forward, adjusting his gloves as he does. He's suspicious, more so than before, but there's a crack, an opening, in his hard outer shell. "What can I do for you?"

Sephiroth smiles a little wider. Seems like what his Da-ge used to say is true after all. Ultimately, all successful company men are opportunists.

"Tell me, Tseng - do you use Materia?" Sephiroth asks.

"... I do, yes," Tseng says slowly. "Though I wouldn't call myself an expert, especially in the face of a SOLDIER."

Well, isn't that a surprise. Humility. "Do you have any you particularly favour?" Sephiroth asks interestedly.

Tseng hesitates, just looking at him for a moment. "I tend to carry at least a Sense and a Barrier with me."

Information and defence. "Fitting," Sephiroth hums, looking him up and down. "Using Materia, you have a pool of MP," he says. "Correct?"

"... Yes, obviously I do," Tseng agrees slowly, even more on edge now. "What of it?"

Sephiroth's eyes wander up his face - and to the red dot adorning the space between his brows.

In PIDW many cultivators marked their upper dantian. Shen Qingqiu did too, when he felt like it, with a little red line. It was where Luo Binghe's Demon Seal rested too, marking his connection and curse from the heavens. What such markings mean tends to vary with the setting and what rules, traditions and myths were in play. But usually

they mark someone as especially enlightened.

Why Tseng has a mark on his forehead, Sephiroth has no idea. He's pretty sure it wasn't ever fully explained or explored, like a lot of other things about Wutai. It's very clearly deliberately applied, and it means something.

Sephiroth hums to himself, as the Turk braces himself for a battle he doesn't even know is already over.

"Tell me, Tseng," he says and smiles, "Do you know where the MP resides in your body?"

By the end of the day Tseng has been left with answers, questions and a whole lot of sections underlined in his original assessment to be removed as no longer applicable. Sephiroth… neither behaves nor reacts as expected, that much is clear. But that's not the most concerning thing, at all.

Sephiroth's Energy Alignment is. His cultivation is a concern. As is the fact that the man is absolutely certain that it can be taught to *anyone.*

There is a number of theories about what is happening to Sephiroth. Professor Hojo has one theory, the Science Department as a whole has another. Tseng himself had added a few more theories to the list, which have now been proven wrong.

Sephiroth's cultivation isn't Wutai in origin. It's similar in nature, self-improvement and self-betterment, the *cultivation* of your *self* in order to advance in your abilities is certainly part of it. But what Sephiroth is doing is taking all that to a metaphysical - or perhaps *magi* physical - level. He is quite literally *cultivating the energies inside himself,* honing them in manner unheard of, into something no one has ever theorised.

And Tseng can't deny that it does indeed seem like it might be an Ancient doctrine. Sephiroth can already perform magical feats without Materia - and according to the man himself, he's still in the beginner stages.

"What will happen once your cultivation is complete?" Tseng can't help but ask, after the day's training and meditation is over and they're making dinner.

"I will ascend to the heavens as a new god," Sephiroth answers loftily and then laughs softly at the look Tseng gives him. "Cultivation is never complete. It doesn't have an end goal. It is a process and a journey - one you dedicate your whole life to."

"... During which you get more and more advanced in your abilities?" Tseng asks, setting aside the chopped vegetables.

During the day he's noted two things. One, Sephiroth reacts best to direct, unambiguous questions. Two, he can't resist a chance to explain. The man had also relaxed immediately when Tseng began asking those questions - and began imparting information with much greater ease.

Tseng had adjusted his approach accordingly.

"Isn't that the goal of everyone who is in progress of learning anything, to get better?" Sephiroth asks and adds the washed rice into a pot, closing the lid. "Cultivation isn't exactly a sliding scale with set points of improvements, but yes, the more you practise, the better you get."

In other words, there's no such thing as being *done* with Sephiroth's new practice. If the man was given leeway, he'd stay here indefinitely, training and meditating. Hmm.

Well, it's good to know that there's definitely a way to remove the man from the volatile equation that is Shinra.

Tseng makes a mental note to procure a permanent and suitably secluded safehouse for Sephiroth, should the need arise, and then moves onto preparing the rest of the food.

Sephiroth watches him with that smug look of satisfaction he's had on for most of the day, and then asks, "Tell me, Tseng, what do they think of all of this back at Shinra?"

Tseng glances at him. "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm curious," Sephiroth smiles. "I know they have theories. I would like to know what they're saying."

Tseng shakes his head. "So that you can adjust your behaviour accordingly?" he asks pointedly.

Sephiroth huffs. "No, of course not. I just think it would be funny,

that's all."

Tseng gives him a look, not believing a word of it. "One of the theories is that you have a case of confabulation."

Sephiroth blinks and then frowns. "What does that mean?"

"You have amnesia, you've forgotten most of your life - but not all," Tseng explains. "You remember some things and are subconsciously leaning more into those things. They take more space in your awareness and have higher importance. Your brain, unbeknownst to you, fabricates memories and knowledge around those few things, giving you a false sense of expertise in matters you probably only perceived peripherally."

Sephiroth looks taken back. "Like what?" he asks, sounding stunned.

"Home decor, fashion, Wutai martial arts, monster knowledge - tea?" Tseng points to the Wutai tea set, Sephiroth's most prized possession here, after his sword. "What little you remember you cling onto and wrap yourself around, to make it seem like you have a past, likes, habits, and preferences."

Sephiroth blinks at that, his brows arching, and Tseng adds, "Though you drank tea before, it was without such ceremony. You've expanded a minor habit into a full on hobby."

"Huh," Sephiroth says, sounding fascinated now. He folds his arms, looking at Tseng in a new light. "You really think that?"

No, not really. Sephiroth's new habits aren't just self-deluding mind-fronting in the face of his amnesia. He's far too well practised and skilled in them. It's not just the tea drinking - everything new he's doing now he does with an unnerving amount of *prior knowledge.*

His new talent as a teacher is the most damning of it all. It's not just knowledge - it's both expertise and experience. Sephiroth teaches like a man who's been doing it for years, who's had hundreds of students, and who both enjoys what he's doing and is very good at it. It's a mix of qualities that only *time* and *practice* can give you.

"I don't know what's going on with you," Tseng admits. "But I know it's not something you got from a simple *Mako injection."*

Thought he still isn't sure he'd call it necessarily *Ancient* knowledge. He's seen the things Aerith does without thinking, without effort, as

natural as breathing. What Sephiroth is doing definitely takes effort.

Tseng still can't quite reconcile them as somehow being the *same,* with how fundamentally different they are. Though after today…

He's not so sure anymore.

Sephiroth hums, his expression going serious as he looks away. Then he shakes his head and offers, cheekily, "Tea, while we wait for the rice to cook?"

Tseng hums and joins him at the tea table, tugging at the knees of his trousers to keep them from stretching as he sits down. Sephiroth makes tea like an old Wutai master, pouring the first steep away and then pouring for them both.

The tea is, of course, perfectly prepared.

For a moment they're quiet, listening to the fire crackling in the stove and how the rice pot start to bubble.

"Are they really trying to recreate what happened?" Sephiroth then asks quietly, somewhat guiltily. "With someone else?"

Tseng considers his mood and then answers honestly. "Yes. With *several* others. Almost the entirety of the SOLDIER program has been tested for viability, though very few suit Professor Hojo's criteria."

Sephiroth's full bottom lip draws into a line. "How many are…?" he can't seem to bring himself to finish the question.

Tseng fishes out his PHS and pulls up the report. "There have been four casualties - SOLDIER Second Class Laxey Jansen, and SOLDIER cadets Mick Rowley, Dient Wreck, Justus Owley, and Gus Fusel," he lists, watching Sephiroth's reaction closely as the man's face tightens with discomfort. Tseng continues, "There have been a number of candidates in and out of coma, too many to list. And there's one case of brain death, cadet Cloud Strife."

The teacup in Sephiroth's hand shatters to a thousand pieces.

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The demon is up to something.

The demon has been up to something ever since he'd crawled out of the Endless Abyss, and especially so since Shen Qingqiu died. The moves Luo Binghe has made have been blatant to the point of being insulting, cutting down obstacles and rivals left and right. He'd conquered the Northern Desert and he rules Huan Hua Palace, the wealthiest sect around, in everything but the name. And why?

Revenge, greed, demonic desire for dominance?

Liu Qingge doesn't care why. He doesn't really even care how. What is it to him if the Northern Demon Realm falls to a half-demon upstart, what do Huan Hua Palace's power struggles have to do with him? Nothing! They can mingle as much they like, they can tear eachother apart for all he cares.

And yet here he is, day after day, to challenge Luo Binghe to a duel. Because in his rotten halls, there is one thing Liu Qingge cares about.

Somewhere in Huan Hua Palace, there's the body of Shen Qingqiu.

Liu Qingge knows it, because the rumours about it are *vile.* They go at length about how Luo Binghe *spends himself* to preserve his dead master. How he slept in the same chambers as his dead master. How he didn't so much as let anyone touch his dead master, not even to wash him or clean the chambers.

And Luo Binghe never denied it.

Liu Qingge hadn't ever seen Shen Qingqiu's body, not since the awful day Luo Binghe had whisked him away - but he'd seen Luo Binghe. He'd seen him bereft, grieving, furious, raging, and always, *always* in denial.

"I will bring him back. If you'd just leave me in peace to work, I will bring him back!"

Insanity. No matter how Liu Qingge wishes it could be otherwise… it's pure insanity. Shen Qingqiu is dead, he's long dead. Far too much time has passed. He must've reincarnated by now. Even if Luo Binghe could drag him back now, it would be cruel to force him into the shape of

his previous life. As much as they might wish it… it isn't up to them.

Luo Binghe is deluding himself. When he should've expressed his gratitude for his master's sacrifice, he instead besmirched his honour. It's shameful, and Shen Qingqiu would've been grieved beyond measure, had he known.

So Liu Qingge has made it his mission to get Shen Qingqiu's body back for a proper burial, and to hopefully knock some sense into Shen Qingqiu most favourite, most troublesome, disciple while he's at it. He would've done it already, if only the brat hadn't grown so damned *strong* in the Abyss.

And now… now Luo Binghe is *up to something*.

"Where is your master?" Liu Qingge barks at the nearest Huan Hua Palace disciple, upon arriving at the palace's gaudy, gilded gates once more.

"Apologising to Peak Lord Liu, the master is… busy," the disciple says with a mixture of resignation and nervousness.

Too busy to defend his claim on Shen Qingqiu? "We'll see about that," Liu Qingge mutters and draws his sword.

With the Huan Hua Palace's warning bells ringing all around, the War God of Bai Zhan Peak rushes the gates and pierces his way through.

He's halfway in and on his way to the wealthier living quarters when Luo Binghe finally deigns to show himself.

"Liu-shishu," the Half demon growls. "This lord doesn't have the time for you now."

"If you don't have time for me, you don't have time for Shen Qingqiu," Liu Qingge answers and waves his sword, aiming it at Shen Qingqiu's student. "Release his body to us!"

Luo Binghe looks frustrated and harried - much like he has in the previous days as well. The demon has been busy, Liu Qingge knows - everyone knows. There's a strange movement in the Northern Desert, and everyone in Huan Hua Palace is on the edge. Something is clearly wrong, and Luo Binghe is distracted.

It's all the opening Liu Qingge needs to attack him.

But ultimately Luo Binghe's state of mind doesn't make a difference.

"I'm so close now! So close to finding him!" Luo Binghe snarls, pinning him down. "I'm not going to let anyone stop me, least of all you! You, of all people, should understand!"

"What's there to understand!" Liu Qingge answers with angry frustration. "Shen Qingqiu is dead! He should have reincarnated by now -"

"Shizun hasn't been reincarnated! He's transmigrated! He's stuck in another body but he's still out there, he's still himself!"

It sounds like nonsense. Annoyingly so, it also sounds like the type of nonsense that has the irritating way of being true. "What are you talking about?!"

Luo Binghe leans closer. "I know *all about it.* Shizun wasn't the original Shen Qingqiu - he took over his body when Shen Qingqiu died. With that body's death he moved on again, to another body, in another world. And he doesn't even know that his last body is right here, that he can come back at any moment! If only I can find him -!

"Shen Qingqiu isn't -?" Liu Qingge blinks at the crazed look on the half-demon's face. "You're crazy. You're lying!"

"I'm not! You remember it, everyone noticed it! Shizun changed - he became good!" Luo Binghe's hands clutch to Liu Qingge, convulsive, demanding understanding. "He became kind. We disciples of Qing Jing Peak thought he had a Qi-deviation - and I know the other Peak Lords tested him for possession."

They head, again and again. Yue Qingyuan had been obsessive about it, using every means to make sure Shen Qingqiu was who he was. They'd all failed. "How do you know he was possessed?"

"It doesn't matter how, what matters is finding where he went next!"

Liu Qingge struggles to free himself and fails. "Why?! You claim your Shizun is a spirit, a wraith possession another - why do you want him back?!" He means to sound forbidding, but his voice comes out barely incredulous. He knows why. The whole damned world knows why.

And there's still a traitorous part of him, going, *what if…*

"Because he's *my* Shizun," Luo Binghe says softly, and then suddenly

drags Liu Qingge up by the collar of his robes. "Come here, Shishu - you can finally be of use to Shizun and *help me."*

Liu Qingge struggles, but is dragged away regardless - through the corridor and into a room he suspects might be part of Luo Binghe's personal rooms. They're grandiose and finely furnished, and there's a decorated doorway with curtains the he suspects might lead to a bedchamber -

But before he can try and take a look, Luo Binghe has pushed him forward, and in front of a great black mirror that dominates the room.

"The Looking Glass," Luo Binghe says with that crazed intensity he only gets about Shen Qingqiu. He's gripping Liu Qingge's shoulders from behind, his fingers like steel, his nails like knives. "It shows you what you most want to see, as long as you know what it is. I don't know what Shizun looks like now, I don't know where he is, so I only get vague images. But maybe with you here -"

"I'm not going to do anything for you!" Liu Qingge snarls.

Luo Binghe's nails dig into his shoulders. "Don't you want to see Shizun?" he breathes and leans in, his red eyes on the mirror. "Don't you want to see Shen Qingqiu - see your *shixiong?* To hear him call you *Liu-shidi* , one more time?"

As much as Liu Qingge tries to fight it, tries to not *think…* that does it. His mind immediately conjures up a mental image and a voice to go with it, of Shen Qingqiu smiling that teasing smile at him while playfully cajoling favours from him. No one, not even his sister, put so much *fondness* into addressing him.

"Shidii~"

As Liu Qingge stares at the mirror in trepidation, as Luo Binghe glares at it like he's trying to force the mirror into compliance… the black surface begins to change.

First they see green. Then some whites and blues. Then the picture is painted as though stroke by stroke to reveal a view of a forest canopy against the sky - and a man, tall and broad-shouldered with hair like spun silver, flying over tree branches with the grace of a Cultivator… but not with a sword. Instead the man is jumping on the thinnest of tree branches, seemingly light as a feather, barely even disturbing the leaves with his weight.

And in his arms is another man, slender with smooth dark hair and a mark on his upper dantian, clutching into the bigger man with barely restrained alarm as he's carried through the air. It's it him? The indignation looks familiar. The black-haired man is saying - shouting - something at the silver-haired man. Who looks down…

And smiles.

Liu Qingge gapes. He knows that smile.

"Shizun," Luo Binghe sighs, his eyes shining. "I found you, Shizun. I finally found you."

End Notes

This is what happens when intrusive thoughts win.

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